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QUEER KENYAN CINEMA

An analysis of the films *Stories of Our Lives* (2014) by Jim Chuchu and *Rafiki* (2018) by Wanuri Kahiu

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Asanteni sana!

Declaration

I hereby declare that my thesis is the result of my own work and that I have marked all sources, including online sources, which have been cited without changes or in modified form, especially sources of texts, graphics, tables and pictures.

I assure that I have not submitted this thesis for any other examination yet.

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1. Introduction

When the film *Nairobi Half Life* had its premiere in Kenya back in 2012, one scene was highly debated. The main character Mwas is a thespian by day and a car-jacker by night. During a theatre rehearsal he sits in a box with his fellow actor Cedric and reflects on his life: “I am having this strange double life. It feels like I have to live like two different people every day” (Gitonga 2012: 01:08:10). As a homosexual man in a country where he must constantly hide his love for men, Cedric can relate to Mwas’ feelings. He misinterprets this as a coming-out confession and replies: “I know exactly what you mean”, while trying to kiss Mwas. The latter is confused and leaves the box abruptly. Although only in a tiny subplot, *Nairobi Half Life* managed to shed some light upon the lives of queer Kenyans. A few years later, *Stories of Our Lives* and *Rafiki* are the first narrative feature films to centre these queer experiences.

In 2014, the first queer Kenyan feature film *Stories of Our Lives* by the multidisciplinary arts collective The NEST had its world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival and was later screened at Berlin International Film Festival. *Stories of Our Lives* consists of five short films narrating experiences of their gay and lesbian main characters: from a high school love to falling for a best friend, from brutal violence to meeting a male escort. The members of the collective feared legal persecution in their home country and decided to remain anonymous. Eventually three of them – Jim Chuchu, George Gachara and Njoki Ngumi – revealed their identities after the premiere. The executive producer George Gachara was imprisoned upon his return to Kenya and charged for shooting without a filming permit. The Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) restricted the distribution, exhibition and broadcasting of the film by arguing that it “has obscenity, explicit scenes of sexual activities and it promotes homosexuality which is contrary to our national norms and values” (KFCB 2014).

In 2018, the second queer Kenyan feature film *Rafiki* by filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and afterwards won many awards at film festivals around the world. The film tells the story of Kena (Samantha Mugatsia) and Ziki (Sheila Munyiva), two young women living in Nairobi, who fall in love despite their homophobic environment and their fathers’ political rivalry. The film is loosely based on the short story “Jambula Tree” (2006) by Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko, who won the Caine Prize for African Writing for it. Like *Stories of Our*

Lives, *Rafiki* was banned by the Kenya Film Classification Board because it "contains homosexual scenes that run counter to the law, the culture and the moral values of the Kenyan people. Indeed, it is our considered view that the moral of the story in this film is to legitimize lesbianism in Kenya" (KFCB 2018). Wanuri Kahiu decided not to re-edit the film according to the board's wishes and instead filed a court case against the ban. The High Court of Kenya lifted the ban for seven days to make it eligible for a submission to the Academy Awards. *Rafiki* was screened in sold-out cinemas across the country but did not receive a nomination as Kenya's entry to the Oscars.

The KFCB justifies the ban of the two films with both cultural and legal reasons. Identifying as homo-, bi-, trans- or intersexual is not a crime in Kenya, however same-sex sexual intercourse and other sexual activities are prohibited. The colonial inherited section 162 of the Kenyan Penal Code states: "Any person who has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; or […] permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years" (Kenya Law 2012: 62). This affects people of all sex and gender. Additionally, section 165 criminalizes "[i]ndecent practices between males" (Kenya Law 2012: 63), which can be penalised with imprisonment for five years. Activists from different Kenyan gay and lesbian human rights organizations brought a case before the High Court of Kenya to abolish these sections and to decriminalize the private, consensual sexual relations of people of the same sex. To create public awareness for the struggle of Kenya's queer community, they started the campaign *#Repeal162* (NGLHRC 2019).

In his book *Facing Mount Kenya,* Kenya's first president after independence, Jomo Kenyatta, writes that "the practice of homosexuality is unknown among the Gĩkũyũ" (1938: 162). Evan Mwangi notes that Kenyatta forgets to mention that marriages among two women were very common in the Gĩkũyũ community and there was no term for homosexuality simply because they did not see the need to make such distinctions in the first place (Mwangi 2014: 99). In this thesis, I do not intend to research on the sociological or political aspects of life for queer people in Kenya nor do I intend to engage in historical or philosophical discussions as to whether homosexuality is imported from the West – or whether it is homophobia that is imported. This important scholarly work has been done elsewhere (Ocholla 2011, Macharia 2013, Goltz et al. 2016, Zingsheim et al. 2017). I rather want to analyse the cinematic representations of

queerness in the two contemporary Kenyan films *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*. Thereby, I will focus on the filmic texts themselves, without addressing accompanying paratexts or the frameworks of production.

Prior to the analysis, I will start with some preliminary remarks regarding my own position as a researcher (chapter 2). This is followed by a brief outline of queer literary works from Kenya (chapter 2.1) and a literature review of studies on (queer) African cinema (chapter 2.2). I conclude the chapter with theoretical considerations with respect to my choice of secondary literature, and with an introduction to my methodological framework for the analysis (chapter 2.3). In the main section of the thesis, I will first introduce the films' plots and narrative structures before I delve into a detailed analysis of selected scenes and motifs (chapter 3). Firstly, I will discuss the films' queer main characters and important side characters, more precisely their parents and close friends (chapter 3.1). Then, I will look into societal structures and how they influence the different characters and vice versa (chapter 3.2). Last but not least, I will identify recurrent queer spaces and address their temporalities (chapter 3.3). Finally, I conclude with a summary of the results from my analysis (chapter 4).

In short, I want to explore the cinematic representations of queer identities with a thematic focus on interpersonal relations, societal structures and spatial settings. How are these various concepts and topics depicted in the selected films and by which cinematic means are they conveyed to the viewers? Furthermore, how do these portrayals reflect or differ from pre-filmic reality and from literary accounts and in which ways may the films contribute to shaping the discourse around queerness in Kenya?

2. Background, Theory and Methodology

Recently, Queer African Studies as a (sub-)discipline has seen a growing body of work (Ekine/Abbas 2013, Matebeni 2014, Sandfort et al. 2015, Matebeni/Monro/Reddy 2018, Nyeck 2019). These anthologies combine artistic and activist perspectives with political and historical analysis of queer life in different African countries. Yet, most of the publications are from or about the South African context, and social science perspectives dominate the discourse around queerness in Africa.

I use the term 'queer' following the Kenyan gay activist and writer Kevin Mwachiro who prefers it to the abbreviation LGBTI that he considers to be "NGO speak" (Mwachiro 2014: 7). Although both the word and the abbreviation include people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual, in this thesis I mostly use queer as a synonym for homosexual orientations. *Rafiki* tells a lesbian love story and *Stories of Our Lives* consists of both gay and lesbian main characters. I am aware that this use of the term queer is problematic, as it contributes to the invisibility of bisexual orientations and transsexual or intersexual identities (Matebeni/Monro/Reddy 2018: 1ff). Yet, it is a self-claimed designation which is also used by the film directors Jim Chuchu and Wanuri Kahiu, as well as by other Kenyan activist and scholars.

Keguro Macharia (2016) rightfully complains that the vast majority of Queer African Studies is being conducted by white scholars from universities in the global north. Similarly, Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraine George reflect on the emerging discipline and remark, that "[j]ust as white scholars have occupied esteemed positions in an African studies canon, white scholars have determined the direction of queer studies. […] African perspectives remain largely excluded from queer of colour critiques and black queer studies" (Currier/Migraine-George 2016: 285). Regrettably, this present thesis is no exception. I analyse the two queer Kenyan films from an outsider's perspective, being a cis-gender heterosexual white male person from Germany. My research interest draws from my work as a filmmaker, and several long-term stays in Kenya. In my Master's program in African Literary and Cultural Studies, I specialized in film and literature with a geographic focus on East Africa. I enjoy the two films as artistic and aesthetic reflections of their own kind, also acknowledging the sentiment they hold for Kenya's queer community. I am aware of this balancing act and I will keep in mind my own privilege throughout the process of writing.

2.1 Queer Kenyan Literature

In African Literary and Cultural Studies, there is a growing interest in queer fiction and film (Zabus 2013, Osinubi/Hoad 2016, Durkin 2017, Hawley 2017, Mwangi 2017, Emenyonu/Hawley 2018). The various case studies can be divided into two kinds: firstly, close readings of contemporary novels and films with queer characters, and secondly, new queer readings of presumably heteronormative novels and films. The research remains predominantly focused on South Africa and West Africa, while the studies on works from East Africa are negligible. Only a few scholars offer queer readings of novels from Kenya. Both Evan Mwangi (2010) and Chantal Zabus (2013) discuss the portrayal of lesbian love in the novel *Ripples in the Pool* (1975) by Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau. Taiwo A. Osinubi (2014) analyses representations of homosexuality in Kenyan prison writing by Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Maina wa Kĩnyatti. And Bernie Lombardi (2018) briefly engages in a queer reading of *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011) by Binyavanga Wainaina. Apart from these examples, there are to my knowledge no notable Kenyan novels to be considered queer.

Instead the short story seems the preferred form for telling queer stories. This is mainly connected to the distribution channels for short stories, which mostly appear in anthologies published outside of the country, that is in places with different laws regarding homosexuality, on the forefront South Africa with its liberal constitution and strong human rights section anchored in it. A prominent example is the critically acclaimed anthology of queer African short stories by Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba. While the first anthology *Queer Africa* (2013) does not include a single story by a Kenyan writer, the second volume *Queer Africa 2* (2017) contains seven short stories from Kenya. The stories are set in both urban and rural environments, and consist of queer characters who differ in age, religious affiliations and socio-economic backgrounds. The variety of these stories shows the complexity and different experiences of living as a queer person in Kenya. Some of the short stories are not only available in print but also online on blogs and can therefore potentially reach a wider audience.

On January 18th, 2014, Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina turned 43 years old. On this occasion, he publicly came out with an essay titled "I am a homosexual, mum" which was published on the blog *Africa Is a Country*. He labelled it a lost chapter from his memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011) and in it, imagined coming

out to his late mum. The news of his homosexuality was highly debated in Kenyan newspapers and television talk shows (The NEST 2015: 260, 268). The essay got republished on other blogs as well as on the website of the Guardian newspaper and gained worldwide attention. Generally, the digital sphere is an important medium of communication for Kenya's queer community. Adriaan van Klinken (2018) analyses the Kenyan music video *Same Love,* which has been published on YouTube to avoid censorship by the government. Evan Mwangi (2014) conducts an analysis of the discourse on online comments about queer identities in Kenya. And Keguro Macharia (2013b), an active blogger himself, describes the queer Kenyan blogosphere and reflects on the (im)possibility to write about blogging in an academic way. Many of these blog articles describe the authors' real-life experiences.

Personal accounts of queer lives in Kenya form also the basis for two anthologies of testimonies, which have been analysed by a few scholars (Muchiri 2015, Olondo 2019, Ombagi 2019b, Van Klinken 2019). Firstly, there is the anthology *Invisible. Stories from Kenya's Queer Community* (2014) by Kevin Mwachiro, a journalist and activist from Kenya. As the title suggests, the book consists of short autobiographical stories by different Kenyans identifying themselves as queer. The variety of stories range from the narration of first kisses, first loves or first sexual encounters to poetic and philosophical examinations of finding one's identity and place in society. In the foreword, Kevin Mwachiro describes his motivation for the book project: "[T]he gay community is not given the space to tell their stories or even determine how they want to be depicted in the public eye. It is my hope that this book gives an insight into the lives of normal people with regular dreams and hopes" (Mwachiro 2014: 7f.). The book was published by the Goethe-Institut Nairobi in collaboration with European embassies and non-profit foundations. In a country with no state financing opportunities for queer projects, Kenyan artists have to rely on outside funding. The Goethe-Institut has also hosted the Out Film Festival Nairobi, which showcases queer films from around the world. Kevin Mwachiro remembers the fruitful and engaging discussions following the film festival which sparked the idea to collect queer stories from all over the country (Mwachiro 2014: 7).

Secondly, Nairobi-based The NEST Collective published the anthology *Stories of Our Lives* (2015), which consists of snippets from interviews with queer Kenyans. It originated from a research project by The NEST in which the members interviewed

more than 250 individuals across Kenya who identify as queer (The NEST 2015: xii). The stories are topically assigned to different chapters of the book, e.g. “Identity”, “Coming Out” and “Religion and Spirituality”. Quite similar to Kevin Mwachiro, The NEST Collective writes in the foreword of their anthology:

> The book you are holding shouldn’t exist, because the people in this book are said not to exist. […] If you do believe that queer people exist in Kenya, then the people in this book might disappoint you. They don’t fit into the narrow African Homosexual Story that characterizes the African Homosexual as a creature of the night, promiscuous diseased, abused-when-young, a corrupter of innocent children, and a godless, anti-family, anti-men, anti-society separatist.
> (The NEST 2015: ix)

The NEST Collective intently tells counter-narratives to diversify the discourse around homosexuality in Kenya. Although the book is not prohibited, it carries a warning on its back cover that it is not for sale to persons under the age of 18 in Kenya. The research project by The NEST resulted not only in the publication of an anthology, but also in the production of the film *Stories of Our Lives*. Both literary and cinematic representations can have an impact on how queer people in Kenya are perceived. In the following, I wish to turn from literature to film and give an overview of queer African cinema.

2.2 Queer African Cinema

In African Film Studies, thus far much research has been done in order to categorize films according to their geographic origin or time frame of production. Monographs and anthologies on African cinema either offer extensive overviews or place exemplary focus on certain aspects of the same recurrent 'classic' Francophone auteur films, while comprehensive analyses of contemporary films are mostly missing (Diawara 2010, Tcheuyap 2011, Ukadike 2014, Barlet 2016, Harrow/Garritano 2019). The existing studies deal almost exclusively with films from West Africa or South Africa. James S. Williams describes African Film Studies as "torn between a perceived need for exhaustive coverage complete with diagnostic account, and a wish for universal paradigms and theoretical templates" (Williams 2019: 27).

Refreshing exceptions from this canon are two recent publications, namely *African Film Studies* (2019) by Boukary Sawadogo and *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema* (2019) by James S. Williams. Both scholars emphasize the need to engage in close-readings of African films and to pay attention to their aesthetic form. Boukary Sawadogo writes in his book, which he conceives as a textbook for teaching African cinemas: "Aesthetics in film is generally about how the subject matter or content is rendered or (re)presented through the director's creative vision. In this context, content and aesthetics are not generally treated separately, as it is the effective blending of the two that enhances the emotional or dramatic charge of a film" (Sawadogo 2019: 12). James S. Williams proposes to approach films "not as repositories of allegorical or political meaning, but rather as unique works in and of themselves offering potential new aesthetic and erotic lines of relational beauty and pleasure" (Williams 2019: 32). He also applies his theoretical considerations to queer African films and illustrates his reasoning with different case studies (Williams 2019: 173ff.).

His research joins a growing body of studies on queer African films. Some authors offer comprehensive regional summaries, like Martin P. Botha (2014) who provides an extensive overview on queer films from South Africa, and Taiwo A. Osinubi (2019b) who discusses queer representations in Anglophone African cinema. Thus far, a comprehensive and extensive study on queer African cinema is yet to be published. Lindsey Green-Simms is working on her forthcoming monograph provisionally titled *The Art of Resistance: LGBT Cinema in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

The vast majority of case studies of queer African films focus on either *Dakan* (1997) by the Guinean filmmaker Mohamed Camara (Migraine-George 2003, Tcheuyap 2005, Schoonover/Galt 2016) or *Karmen Geï* (2001) by the Senegalese director Joseph Gaï Ramaka (Dovey 2009, M'Baye 2011, Bâ/Taylor-Jones 2012, Coly 2016, Stobie 2016, Green-Simms 2019). *Dakan* is considered the first sub-Saharan fiction film about homosexuality and tells the story of two young men who are in love with each other and have to overcome many obstacles from family and society. *Karmen Geï* is a Senegalese adaptation of Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen* and the filmmaker imagines Karmen as a bi-sexual dancer who challenges and disrupts societal conventions. Additionally, the critically acclaimed South-African film *Inxeba* (2017) by John Trengove about the love between two men who are part of a Xhosa initiation ritual is likely to join the corpus of 'African queer classics', and there are already a few articles on it (Andrews 2018, Kirby-Hirst/Karam 2018, Mbao 2020).

Apart from these queer auteur films, there are some studies which deal with the representation of homosexuality in Nigerian and Tanzanian video films (Green-Simms 2012, Green-Simms/Azuah 2012, Lyonga 2014, Böhme 2015). With a few 'gay-friendly' exceptions, most of these films are homophobic in so far as they reproduce negative stereotypes about homosexuality. Interestingly, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt describe how queer Nigerian audiences appropriate the homophobic films and re-edit scenes of same-sex intimacy into queer-friendly mash-ups which are then shared on YouTube and other social media platforms (Schoonover/Galt 2016: 179f.). However, Lindsey Green-Simms remarks that "[i]f one is to call these films queer, then it must be acknowledged that they do not celebrate queerness" (Green-Simms 2018: 655).

Unlike in West and South Africa, the majority of the queer films in East Africa are documentaries. Lizelle Bisschoff traces the negligence of narrative films in East Africa back to the effects of colonization by the British, who established a tradition of non-fiction film making (Bisschoff 2015: 72f.). Most of these East African documentary films are shot in Uganda and focus on queer protagonists who are threatened by the country's homophobic legislation, for example *Call Me Kuchu* (2012) by Malika Zouhali-Worrall and Katherine F. Wright, *God Loves Uganda* (2013) by Roger Ross Williams, and *The Pearl of Africa* (2016) by Jonny von Wallström. All these films are made by outsiders from Europe or the USA. A recent exception is the first queer Kenyan feature documentary *I Am Samuel* (2020) by the Kenyan filmmaker Peter Mur-

imi. It portrays a gay man who lives a closeted life in a rural area and is torn between family and love. The documentary film joins *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives* in representing queer Kenyan lives on screen. Thus far, there are only a few publications which discuss these two queer narrative feature films (Gunkel 2019, Ombagi 2019a, Osinubi 2019a, Bisschoff/Van de Peer 2020). The present thesis attempts to fill this gap in studies on queer African cinema.

2.3 Queer Film Analysis

'Queer' describes not only gender identities and sexual orientations, but also theoretical approaches. Queer theory focuses on disrupting the heteronormative world by uncovering stereotypes about sexual orientations and gender identities and opposing them. Adriaan van Klinken notes that "the two senses of the term *queer* are not always clearly distinguished and can blur into each other" (Van Klinken 2019: 7). Keguro Macharia sketches which queer methodological approaches could enrich African Studies: "I am interested in promoting a [sic!] Queer African Studies that centres Africa-based archives and methods, African thinkers and artists, African geo-histories and fractures, as these learn from and encounter other methods and archives focused on blackness, gender, sex, and sexuality" (Macharia 2015: 245). Similarly, Stella Nyanzi makes a case for more research on the continent by Africans and notes: "The methods of queering queer Africa necessarily demand innovation, creativity, multi-disciplinary and a combination of academic scholarship, social activism and the diverse lived realities of local queer Africans" (Nyanzi 2014: 64). These assumptions shift the focus from a stereotypical depiction of the African continent as a homogeneous space of homophobia to a more nuanced representation of various, sometimes contradicting queer experiences, or what Adriaan van Klinken calls "queer arts of resistance" (Van Klinken 2019: 4).

In my analysis of the films, I will use methodological tools derived from film studies in conjunction with theoretical approaches from queer theory. My attempt is not to reproduce the constructed dichotomy between knowledge production based on data and primary works from the global south, analysed with theories from the global north. Instead, I will use a lot of secondary literature by Kenyan and African writers, ranging from works by queer activists and scholars alike, with different disciplinary backgrounds. Needless to say, in a global academic network of knowledge production, many African scholars equally reference theories from the global north. I follow Sheila J. Petty who notes that "[d]e-Westernizing African film studies does not involve simply banishing Western theory from discussion. Rather, the goal is to widen debate by the inclusion of African history, culture, economics, and politics" (Petty 2012: 78). Consequently, I will read the films in conjunction with other forms of artistic expression by queer Kenyans, and against the backdrop of Kenya's social and political landscape.

Films inhere the strength to convey feelings and messages in different layers. Apart from the dialogue, statements can be set through visual form and sound level, and this simultaneity creates the cinematic experience. My approach is to analyse the films both at the level of broader recurrent themes and characters, and to give specific examples in single shot and shot sequences. By doing so, I want to give justice to both the content and the form of the two films and to highlight their similarities and differences. I am interested in the blank spaces, in things which remain unsaid, in subtle comments and references by cinematic means. The use of signs and symbols is especially interesting in Kenya's cultural contexts, where everyday life interactions are peppered with indirect communication (Miller/Booker 2017). Additionally, it is a way to leave room for interpretation by the audience and to elude censorship by the government, though it was not successful in the cases of *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*. Both films are connected to different literary works, thus I will offer an intermedial reading and discuss the process of adaptation from written word into moving image. By comparing, I want to exemplary highlight the different possibilities and limitations of each medium (Boggs/Petrie 2008: 430).

My analysis of the films' aesthetics focuses on the cinematography, which includes the type of shots, camera height and angles, static or mobile framing, and shot composition; and the *mise-en-scène,* including colour composition, lighting, costumes, and set-design (Sawadogo 2019: 65). I also discuss the audio layer consisting of dialogues and voice-over, film score, and additional sounds. Thereby, I differentiate between diegetic and non-diegetic sound: diegetic sound has its source within the film's world, and non-diegetic sound is edited in during post-production (Sawadogo 2019: 89). Last but not least, I analyse the process of editing, in particular the deployment of time manipulation – slow-motion, reverse-motion, flash-back, flash-forward – and the sound-design. I use these analytical frameworks to explore which narratives are told about queerness in Kenya and how these subject matters are conveyed by cinematic means. Through my eclectic combination of queer theory and film studies methodology – with a special emphasis on African knowledge production – I want to bridge the gap between activism, art, and academia.

3. Analysis: *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*

> I watched *Rafiki* seven days in a row, every single one of the days the ban had been lifted. […] In the cinema, I was held by other Black queer women who resonated with the realities of loving other Black women under duress. We passed pocket tissues around and rested our heads on each other's shoulders. We squeezed each other's hands. We were vulnerable. […] We watched these two queer women come of age together and some of us came of age with them. In *Rafiki* we saw ourselves, our lives, our joys, our struggles, our triumphs. We were real. (Kirui 2018)

The quote above reflects the significance of the film *Rafiki* for the queer community in Kenya. The statement by a queer Kenyan woman ends with the hopeful words: "We were real". This refers to a wish expressed several times throughout the film by the lead characters Kena and Ziki. They dream of a place to openly express their love for each other and seemingly the audience can resonate with this feeling. While watching the film, the cinema itself becomes a place of comfort.

The narrative structure of Rafiki is a classical three-act-structure: the story consists of a setup (first act), a confrontation (second act), and a resolution (third act). The three-act-structure is considered a closed story structure, because the different acts follow a causal narration, which leads to a resolution in the third act. The first and the third act each take up about the first and the last quarter of the total running time, while the second act in between takes up half of the film. In the first act, we are introduced to the main characters Kena and Ziki and the supporting characters like their parents, Kena's friend Blacksta, and Mama Atim. We also learn about the different relations between the characters and the central conflict of the film – the forbidden love between Ziki and Kena – is foreshadowed. This conflict is reinforced through Kena's and Ziki's fathers' political rivalry, and their families' different ethnic and class affiliations. When the two women meet alone for the first time on the top of a building, this marks the first plot point and the transition to the second act (Kahiu 2018: 00:17:40). In the first half of the second act, their friendship develops into a romance and culminates at the midpoint of the film, where Kena and Ziki spend their first night together (00:37:24). In the second half of the second act, they experience setbacks from their family and friends because of their relationship. This animosity towards them escalates into brutal mob violence, which marks the second plot point and the transition to the third and last act (00:54:28). In the third act, we learn about the different reactions of friends and families towards their outing and the forced end of their relationship, because Ziki is sent to London.

After a leap in time, Kena hears about Ziki's return to Nairobi after several years abroad (01:11:40). The film finishes with an open ending and it is not certain, whether Kena and Ziki get back together. Therefore, the ending interrupts the closed storytelling of a conventional three-act-structure and opens it up for interpretations by the audience.

In the process of adaptation of the short story "Jambula Tree" into the film, the script writers transposed the narrative perspective from first-person into objective point-of-view, which happens more often than not when adapting a literary text into film, because of the different media (Boggs/Petrie 2008: 439). In "Jambula Tree", the story is told by the first-person narrator Anyango and we learn about her thoughts and feelings. In *Rafiki*, Kena is the main character and we follow her as the story unfolds, yet her thoughts are not verbalized in a voice-over and only her facial expressions and actions suggest how she might feel. Apart from dialogue scenes in which Kena puts her thoughts into words, the filmmakers use cinematic means like *mise-en-scène* and music to convey Kena's feelings and emotions.

Stories of Our Lives uses episodic storytelling, which is considered an open story structure. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt argue that queer films tend to have an open structure, because queer lives do not succumb to a straight linear time, or what they call 'heterotemporality' (Schoonover/Galt 2016: 267f., 286). Each of the five episodes follow a dramatic narrative, yet they remain fragmentary and only offer short glimpses into different queer realities by telling independent stories. "Ask Me Nicely" tells the story of two girls in high school, who secretly start a relationship until one is expelled and back at home cheats on her girlfriend with a boy from neighbourhood. "Run" is centred around a gay man and his homophobic friend, who learns about the other's sexual orientation and physically assaults him. "Athman" is set on a tea farm and narrates the main character's love for his best friend, who is heterosexual and does not return his friend's feelings. "Duet" tells the story of a Kenyan researcher who hires a British escort to his hotel room in London. And finally, in "Each Night I Dream" two women who are in a relationship fear Kenya's homophobic legislation and society and imagine their escape to a queer-friendly place.

The filmmakers use different narrative perspectives in the individual episodes. "Athman" and "Duet" are both told from an objective point-of-view, thus the proportion of dialogue in the film is relatively high, in order to convey the thoughts of the characters. Interestingly, the dialogue sequences are filmed in a similar way visually: static

centred tripod shots frame the characters sitting or standing next to each other and facing the direction of the camera, which creates the impression of a theatre performance. The characters do not establish eye contact while talking, which could either emphasize the sensitivity of topics or derive from cultural conventions for conversations. The first two episodes – "Ask Me Nicely" and "Run" – are told from objective point-of-view in the beginning and finally change into first-person narration. We hear the main character's voice-over recounting what happened next and how their lives changed later on. The last episode "Each Night I Dream" deploys yet another narrative strategy: the episode intertwines reality and dream sequences and can be described as an internal monologue of the main character. This stream of consciousness technique is visualized in abstract images which borrow from Afro-futurist aesthetics towards the end of the film. The main character's thoughts and feelings are verbalized throughout the episode in a voice-over narration.

While *Rafiki* presents the love story of Kena and Ziki in bright popping colours, *Stories of Our Lives* is entirely shot in black and white. In an interview with the Goethe-Institut Nairobi, the director Jim Chuchu explains this decision for both technical and artistic reasons:

> We had two reasons. One, cutting out the colour allowed us to focus on form and shadow, it simplifies some things technically. The second reason was more a question of representation. When you look at films that are set in Africa or about Africa, you always find the same colours: brown like the savannah, green like the jungle, and golden like the sunsets. When you look outside of the window, you will see that this is not a brown city. Kenya comes in many different colours. People talk a lot about changing the negative imagery coming out of Africa, but that discussion has never studied the formal structure of the images coming out of Africa. There is a chromatic hegemony that needs tackling as well. That's something we want to break away from, hence the decision to shoot it in black and white. (Chuchu as cited in Bretz 2015)

Surprisingly, Eddie Ombagi (2019a) categorizes the film as a documentary and not as a fictional film. Of course there are many similarities in aesthetics and storytelling among fiction and non-fiction films, and both represent an artistic depiction of reality. I am also aware that both forms can sometimes blend into each other creating hybrid forms, yet I would still clearly identify the film *Stories of Our Lives* as a work of fiction. The main reason for this is the presence of actors and actresses in the film, unlike in documentary films where protagonists only represent themselves and not other people. Although non-fiction films may at times use re-enactment to visualize events which happened in the past, those scenes are usually interwoven with interviews and footage from the present.

In *Stories of Our Lives*, only the news footage in “Each Night I Dream” can be considered documental, as it directly references to a pre-filmic reality. The film is based on true stories by Kenyan queers, which The NEST Collective gathered and transformed into an episodic fiction film. Henriette Gunkel remarks that the filmmakers “consciously turn[ed] away from the genre of documentary film and towards the potential of the fictional” (Gunkel 2019: 391). According to her, the collective problematizes “that documentary film is a popular medium when it comes to the representation of homosexuality on the African continent” (Gunkel 2019: 391). Additionally, this decision was also made to protect the identities of their interview partners.

Both *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives* shed light on the lives of marginalized queer people within the Kenyan society. In the following analysis I want to explore whose stories are being told and I want to identify recurrent motifs, characters, and narrative strategies in the two films.

3.1 Characters

> Going through the book *Stories of Our Lives* felt like revisiting various experiences I've had as a gay man living in Kenya. From my relationships in high school, to my first time being in a gay bar, to having close feelings for a close friend who happened to be straight. My experiences will never be heard by the world, but the book gave me hope because other Kenyans who share similar experiences have told it to the world. (Anonymous as cited in Van Klinken 2019: 103)

Queer people in Kenya – as elsewhere in the world – often lack the power to claim names for themselves and they rely on the derogatory designations by society. Within the community they can either subvert original meanings and reverse them into something positive or they refer to each other with alternative coded words. The term 'queer' itself has been appropriated by the lesbian-, gay-, bi- and transsexual-community in the USA. Its original meaning is 'strange' or 'odd' and it was used pejoratively to denounce homosexual people. In Kiswahili, there is no equivalent term for queer, and homosexuality is referred to as *mapenzi ya jinsia moja* (love between the same gender). Pejorative designations are *msenge* (gay man or transgender), *msagaji* (lesbian), and *shoga* (faggot). Several times in the two films, people use the word *shoga* to insult homosexual men. However, in *Kiswahili sanifu* (Standard Kiswahili), *shoga* is a word for a woman's close female friend (Williams 2019: 316). The title of Wanuri Kahiu's film *Rafiki* bears another double entendre. In Kiswahili, commonly *rafiki* means 'friend', but "often when Kenyans of the same sex are in a relationship, they forgo the ability to introduce their partners, lovers, mates, husbands or wives as they would like, and instead call them 'rafiki'" (Kahiu in Osinubi 2019b: 339). Consequently, Kena introduces herself to Ziki's mother as "a friend of Ziki's" (Kahiu 2018: 00:26:39). Similarly, in the last episode of *Stories of Our Lives*, the main character Liz narrates in a voice-over that she and her girlfriend tell people that they are sisters (Chuchu 2014: 00:50:16). Kena is the short form for Makena, a Meru name which means 'always happy' (Mutengi/Nabea/Gwachi 2017: 672). This is an interesting choice, because the English word 'gay' in its original sense also bears the meaning 'happy'. Ziki could be a short form for the Kiswahili words *riziki* (subsistence) or *muziki* (music). *Riziki* is also the title of a song from 2005 by the Kenyan popular music band Ja-Mnazi Afrika, which was highly successful in Kenya (Mboya 2015). According to Tom M. Mboya (2015), the song has been marketed with ethnic categorization reproducing perceptions of ethnic difference, which could be a reference to the underlying ethnic conflict between Ziki's and Kena's fathers. Ziki as the short form for

muziki, on the other hand, could reflect her interest in dancing to music, which she practices with her female friends several times in the first half of the film.

In the following, I will investigate recurring aesthetic strategies, cinematic codes, and visual symbols which are used to put the character's inner emotions and thoughts onto the screen. Firstly, I will analyse the character development of the various protagonists and how it is represented in the two films. In a second step, I want to identify some archetypes of supporting characters who are related in different ways to the queer main characters. *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives* both feature numerous side characters beside the main protagonists. I am interested in the representation of friends and parents in the two films, and want to discuss their reactions towards their children's or friend's queerness, and how they are depicted in an area of tension between enmity and allyship. In the context of the two films, I see allies as heterosexual friends or parents of the main characters who support and defend them in hostile environments.

3.1.1 Protagonists

In both films, the main characters are grappling with their queer identities and with societal imposed gender roles. These inner conflicts and developments are either expressed through dialogues and voice-over or through the change of the character's outer appearance, be it clothes, make-up or hair styles.

In the first episode of *Stories of Our Lives* titled "Ask me nicely", Kate's hair and clothes reflect her inner conflict dealing with the feelings she has developed for her fellow student Faith. After being suspended from school, Kate meets her mother at home who is angry but not surprised about the suspension as it is not the first time. Kate's mother mimics her daughter in a degrading way and threatens her: "Unajua ni nini kinatendeka kwa wasichana kama wewe? (Do you know what happens to girls like you?)[1]" (Chuchu 2014: 00:06:48). By this remark, Kate's mother only indirectly refers to her daughter's homosexuality. Then, she forces her daughter to change clothes and prohibits her from wearing trousers. Wearing trousers denotes masculinity, her mother would rather however that she was more feminine. Also, the trousers can be seen as a symbol for Kate's sexual orientation, when her mother commands her: "Na uingie huko

1 For all quotations in Kiswahili or Sheng, I include the English subtitles in round brackets and my own translations or remarks in square brackets.

ndani na utoe hizo nguo! (Go and change!)" (00:07:15). By telling Kate to stop wearing trousers, she expects her to stop loving women. While the original Kiswahili command contains the reference to *nguo* (clothes), the English subtitles lack this further specification and it is translated into: "Go and change!". Thus, for English only speakers it can be understood in both ways, referring to her trousers or to her sexual orientation. By referencing trousers, her mother avoids naming and thereby admitting her daughter's homosexuality. The next scene shows Kate in a medium-wide shot in her room (00:07:22). She wears a sleeveless black dress and tries to pull it into shape. Afterwards she directly faces the camera and poses at a mirror, a sceptical and dissatisfied look on her face. She is reluctant yet obeys her mother's order. This look creates the illusion that the camera is positioned directly behind the mirror. By positioning the camera in this way, the filmmakers manage to establish a silent dialogue with the audience. Kate looks at her reflection in the mirror, and the audience reflects about Kate's and perhaps their own situation. In school, Kate wears her dreadlocks tied back, at home she wears them down. Just like wearing a dress, having shoulder-length hair worn down denotes femininity.[2] This different hair style is another attempt by Kate to look more feminine in order to conform to societal conventions, but it could be also interpreted as a symbol for trying to change her sexual orientation. In the following sequence she meets a boy from the neighbourhood and has sex with him (00:07:56). The forced transformation of her outer appearance goes in hand with a change of her dating behaviour. One would assume she is bisexual, but after her return to school she explains to Faith that she just slept with the boy to find out if she is really homosexual (00:11:52). Consequently, back in school again she wears trousers and has her hair tied back. She might consequently be adhering to school regulation, but it also reflects her peace of mind: Kate now embraces her identity as a lesbian woman and does not need to disguise herself any more.

The symbolism of clothing to reflect the characters' inner emotions is equally used for Kena and Ziki in *Rafiki*. In line with mainstream gender expression, Ziki appears more feminine with playful dresses, long twisted purple and magenta hair extensions, and pink lipstick. The pink and purple colour palette is not only visible in her clothing, but pink is also the colour of the building Ziki lives in and purple is associated

2 Black hair politics is a highly discussed topic at the intersection of different forms of oppression like racism, sexism, and classism, and traces back from European colonialism to contemporary white European standards of beauty in Africa and beyond. Therefore, hair has a high importance for Black people, and Black women in particular (see Dabiri 2019).

with her father's political party. Purple is the colour of queer-feminism and also references the purple leaves of the jambula tree in the original short story by the same name (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 177). Additionally, purple could be an intermedial link to Alice Walker's famous novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and her concept of womanism, which – in contrast to 'white' feminism – centres the experiences of black women: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker 1983: xii). The stronger colour purple symbolizes a more radical and non-exclusive critique of hetero-patriarchy.

Figure 1: Kena and Ziki on their first date at Uhuru Park (Kahiu 2018: 00:27:40)

Kena, on the other hand, wears trousers and shirts in various bright colours, accessories like caps complement her outfit and give her a masculine look. Additionally, element of her clothing incorporate *kitenge* fabric, like a sewn on pocket or a backpack. Kena's clothing colour scheme develops throughout the film and mirrors her growing inner affection for Ziki. The more she falls for Ziki, the more pink her outfits get. When Kena picks up Ziki from home for their first date at Uhuru Park, she wears a pink cap (Kahiu 2018: 00:26:32). In a following scene at the night club, Ziki tries to convince Kena to try on a pink dress from a vendor (00:28:55). Later on in the film, Kena wears the dress at home in presence of her mother Mercy and Ziki as they prepare to go to church (00:43:52). At first, Kena protests and says that her body is allergic to dresses, but eventually she gives in. Her mother is very happy with the dress and ensures her that

she looks “like a proper woman” (00:44:21). Interestingly, for Mercy the feminine dressing symbolizes hope that her daughter may be ‘normal’ – that is heterosexual and gender-conforming – and not ‘different’ any more, a concern which she has expressed before (00:21:23). She now only wishes for a ‘nice rich doctor’ to marry Kena. For Ziki on the other hand, the dress makes Kena even more attractive for her. She calls Kena “very sexy” (00:44:25) in the presence of her mother, who does not know about the romantic relationship and therefore does not suspect a sexual connotation. I assume that Kena’s ‘allergy to dresses’ is a metaphor as well. She does not dislike the feminine clothing itself, but the sexist stereotypes and gender roles in a patriarchal society which are connected to femininity.

As their romance develops, Kena and Ziki disagree on how openly they can show their affection for each other in public. Kena wants to be more careful than Ziki, which leads to a controversy between them. The next time they see each other in the streets, Kena wears a white shirt with one of its sleeves made in *kitenge* fabric (00:49:26). The sleeve has a pattern of intertwined and connected lines in green and purple. These two colours are affiliated with their fathers’ political parties thereby emphasizing their coming from rival families. Although in this scene Kena and Ziki seem to be distant, their lives are interconnected, just like the pattern on Kena’s sleeve, and they will eventually find a way back to each other. Already in the following scene Kena wears a pink shirt which shows that her love for Ziki never waned (00:50:21). After the two women get involuntarily outed and beaten up by an angry mob, and Kena’s mother tries to ‘heal’ her daughter through church prayers from homosexuality, the next scene shows Kena in her bed wearing a purple shirt (01:02:19). Her shirt made by the Kenyan Afro-Urban fashion label ChilliMango has a Kiswahili imprint in the shape of the African continent that reads *Afrika Ni Mama* (Africa is the mother) referencing Pan-Africanism. The choice of colour suggests that Kena’s love for Ziki is still present. Kena opens up a small hand mirror and looks at her reflection. We see her face slightly shifted and divided into two parts by the frame of the mirror. It is not only a reflection of her face, but of her state of mind. It refers to the double life she had to live by hiding her sexual orientation and to the struggles to form her identity. Her look into the mirror could be associated with self-doubt and self-alienation, but I rather read it as a moment of self-assurance. Kena wants to confirm who she really is and that she has stayed true to herself.

The symbolism of a mirror appears in three episodes of *Stories of Our Lives.* Other than Kate in the above mentioned first episode "Ask me nicely", Pato in "Run" and Achieng in "Each Night I Dream" look at themselves in mirrors. Pato does so when he gets dressed to go to the queer night club (Chuchu 2014: 00:16:35). With an excited smile on his face, he buttons up his shirt. He whistles cheerfully as he rolls up its sleeves and smooths the shirt. A reassuring look into the mirror shows that he is pleased with his reflection. This is truly who he is, a good-looking gay man who is about to enjoy a night out in a queer club. He looks confident, and not shy or intimidated like in the scenes before, when he spends time with his homophobic friend Kama. Back at home from the night club, Pato still wears the same shirt and lies down on his bed (00:19:11). Pato smiles and bites his lips. He remembers dancing with another man, visualized through short flashback snippets of them in the night club. When Kama knocks on his door, Pato is frightened and quickly changes his shirt for a casual one. By doing this, he disguises his queer self with a hetero-passing self. He wants to hide the shirt and the memories from the night club attached to it. For Kama, Pato – unsuccessfully – tries to continue to play the straight friend. In "Each Night I Dream", Liz' girlfriend Achieng puts on lipstick in front of a huge mirror. She is framed central in a close-up, and we can see Liz out of focus in the background. Tense atmospheric music creates a dangerous undertone and a homophobic politician agitates against homosexuals in a voice-over. Achieng looks deeply worried about their situation and she tells Liz, that she does not know what to do. Absent-mindedly she applies the lipstick as if to shield herself from what she has to endure outside of their own four walls. Here, the make-up symbolizes the constant hiding of their true queer selves.

Kena's gender expression tends to be more masculine, she rides a skateboard and plays football with her male friends. The men do not want Ziki and her female friends to join them in the game, but they regard Kena as one of them: "Kena hucheza kama mwanaume. Si ndiyo, Kena? (She plays like a guy. Right Kena?)" (Kahiu 2018: 00:22:41). Rather than questioning or abandoning their gender stereotypes, Kena's male friends distinguish between the more masculine Kena and the more feminine Ziki. Nevertheless, Kena is still considered as a romantic prospect, and Blacksta sees her as a potential wife, which he expresses several times in the film. Taiwo A. Osinubi highlights the different treatment of gender non-conforming men and women in the film: while the presumably gay character Tom experiences verbal and physical violence, "gender non-

conforming women […] are praised for their vigour and performance of female masculinity – *they are one of the guys* – as long as their sexual preference for women is not openly expressed" (Osinubi 2019a: 74). This shows how homophobia and sexism need to be seen as interwoven structures of oppression in a heterosexist patriarchal society, which leads to the distinction between gay men who dress more feminine and are considered 'less of a man' and lesbian women who dress more masculine and are seen as 'less of a woman'. Thus queer men lose some of their male privilege, while queer women can to an extent benefit from male privilege.

Despite the animosity towards same-sex love the lead characters have to experience, the two films also show moments of queer self-acceptance after living a life of hiding and rejection. This awakening and embracing of one's queer identity is visually expressed by backward tracking shots, in which the characters move towards the camera. In *Rafiki*, this shot is placed after Kena and Ziki have broken up and Kena has left Ziki's place (Kahiu 2018: 01:10:39). Kena confidently walks down the street and looks straight ahead, with a mixed expression on her face. Her eyes show some sadness about the end of the relationship, yet there is also certainty that she has made the right decision. Her lip is still wounded from the mob violence and points to the hatred she has been confronted with. Nevertheless she looks strong and at peace with herself. In "Run", the main character Pato's self-acceptance is represented in the last scene of the episode (Chuchu 2014: 00:22:18). After escaping from the beatings of his 'friend' Kama and running through the night, the next day he finds himself somewhere in nature lying on his back. Framed in a wide shot, he gets up and starts walking towards the camera. A jump-cut throws him into an urban environment, in another tracking-shot he keeps walking through a narrow backstreet. In a voice-over he narrates the end of his friendship with Kama. His last words in this episode are: "Sijawahi ona Kama tangu hiyo siku. Nikakutana na Kama saa hii siezi kimbia. Nimemaliza hii mbio. (I've never seen Kama since that day. If I met him now, I wouldn't run. I'm done running.)" (00:23:28). This bold statement proclaims his acceptance of himself. He is tired of running and confident about his identity as a queer person.

3.1.2 Parents

In many of the written testimonies from queer Kenyans, stories of coming-out to their families and in particular to their parents are mentioned. In Kevin Mwachiro's *Invisible* for instance, several chapters are imaginative letters to parents or the writers deal with their relations to family members (Mwachiro 2014: 24, 30, 100, 106). In the anthology *Stories of Our Lives*, one chapter in the book titled "Coming Out" is a collection of different experiences and reactions of parents, who got to know about their children's non-hetero sexuality (The NEST 2015: 253ff.). Albeit the relationship to the parents and coming out to them is an important aspect in the book *Stories of Our Lives*, it does not play a big role in the film. In almost all the episodes, parents or other family members are not mentioned. It is only in the film's first episode "Ask me nicely", where Kate's mother appears in a short scene discussed above (Chuchu 2014: 00:06:17).

In "Jambula Tree", the first-person narrator Anyango describes the relationship to her mother, her father, and to Sanyu's parents in detail. When Sanyu gets suspended from school, because she defended Anyango and fought another student, Anyango's mother reacts very strictly and prohibits all contact between her daughter and Sanyu. Sanyu, in turn, is beaten by her mother (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 174f.). Later, the two girls get caught being intimate under the jambula tree and her parents send Sanyu to London. Anyango recalls the reactions: "My mother has gotten over that night. It took a while, but she did. Maybe it is time for your mother to do the same" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 164). This shows that although their mothers are strongly against the relationship, they do not cast out their children and may eventually reconcile with them. Elsewhere in the story Anyango depicts her mother as a single parent, who mourns her past marriage and nonetheless has to be strong for her children. Anyango's father has left her for a younger wife, with whom he now has another child (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 171). In times her mother is sad, she opens her maroon suitcase and reads out aloud the love letters he had sent her and which she has kept. Some of the metaphors he uses are quite ambiguous: "Hello my sweet supernatural colours of the rainbow. […] If loving you is a crime I am the biggest criminal in the world" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 172). The rainbow as a symbol for the queer movement and the reference to love as a crime is definitely no coincidence. These lines could have also been written by Anyango to Sanyu. At the end of the short story, her mother seems to have gotten over her past marriage, because she does

not read the letters any more. Instead, Anyango added a letter from Sanyu to her mother's letters in the maroon suitcase, which she received five years after the latter left for London. It says: "A. I miss you. S." (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 177). This shows the similarities between mother and daughter, who both build their lives on memories of lost loves. Though while her mother has finally closed this chapter of her life and moved on, Anyango is still hopeful to see Sanyu again, even after all these years have passed.

Figure 2: Kena's mother Mercy in her apartment with walls painted green (Kahiu 2018: 00:21:31)

The juxtaposition of the two relationships is equally narrated in the cinematic adaptation of the short story. In one scene, Kena finds her mother Mercy asleep on the sofa next to an open suitcase full of envelopes (Kahiu 2018: 00:25:30). The mother holds an unfolded letter in her hands and Kena carefully covers her with a blanket and places the letter back inside the suitcase. At the end of the film Kena reads a postcard from Ziki with exactly the same words on it like in the short story (01:13:18). Taiwo A. Osinubi notes: "When Kena clings to the lone and cryptic postcard she receives from Ziki, we are meant to intuit a connection between Kena's attachment to the postcard and her mother's attachment to an archive of exhausted love" (Osinubi 2019: 76). Kena has kept the postcard in her locker at the hospital, it is hidden from view, just like her mother's letters in the suitcase. Mercy's affection for her former husband John Mwaura

is also visible in the *mise-en-scène* of her apartment. Some of the walls are painted green, the colour in the film associated with him. It is his political party's colour scheme and his small shop is painted green as well. Just like John is still present in Mercy's apartment, he is present in her thoughts. Both Kena and Mercy appear to be trapped in expectations and conventions set up by society. By portraying their relationships in a similar way, the filmmakers normalize same-sex romance and do not show it as something extraordinary in comparison to heterosexual relations. While in "Jambula Tree" nothing much is said about Anyango's father, in *Rafiki* the character of John is well developed and he is an example of a fully supportive parent. Mercy on the other hand is portrayed in a similar way in both the short story and the film, she strongly opposes her daughter's relationship and tries to change her homosexuality through prayer.

In the following, I will look closely into exemplary scenes between Kena and her mother and Kena and her father, respectively. The scenes are situated in the beginning and towards the end of the film, and therefore show the development of how her parents think about Kena's relationship with Ziki. Ziki is the daughter of John's political rival, Peter Okemi. In the very beginning of the film, this conflict is established through the omnipresent election posters stuck onto the walls in the neighbourhood. Directly after Kena and Ziki have exchanged shy smiles and hidden gazes across the road, a close-up shot shows their fathers' campaign posters next to each other on a wall (Kahiu 2018: 00:06:02). They bear huge portrait photos of the contestants, John Mwaura's slogan on the green poster reads 'The people's choice', while Peter Okemi on his purple poster calls himself 'Man of action'. Later on in the film, their reaction towards their daughters relationship will resemble these slogans. The contestant politicians do not only belong to different political parties, but also to different ethnic groups: Mwaura is a Meru name and Okemi a Luo name. This is reminiscent of the current political landscape in Kenya which tends to be based on ethnic affiliations. Shortly afterwards, the ethnic dichotomy is undermined when Mama Atim gossips about Mr. Otieno – a Luo – and Mrs. Kamau – a Gĩkũyũ – having an affair (00:06:55). Often times in Kenya, these two ethnic groups are constructed as hostile towards each other, thus a sexual relationship could symbolize hope for bridging ethnic division. However, having an affair is not a marriage, which could be an indication that the possible reconciliation in the country is yet be achieved.

When Kena and her father John have a talk in his shop, the two are divided by white metallic bars which separate the sales room from the area behind the counter (00:10:05). This division is also symbolic of Kena's distant relation to her father. When he tries to cross this boundary and enters from behind the counter into the sales room, Kena excuses herself and leaves the shop (00:06:20). She is clearly not interested in a better relationship with her father since he left the family and she now stays alone with her mother. When John notices that Kena and Ziki spend time together, he is upset with her, because he fears it will have a negative impact on his election campaign (00:31:02). Mercy on the other hand tells Kena that she should invite Ziki to their apartment for them to get to know each other (00:20:55). At this point Mercy is unaware that the two have a romantic relationship and she thinks that they are only good friends.

In "Jambula Tree", Sanyu's father is sexually abusing his daughter. The first-person narrator Anyango recalls what she heard about him from Sanyu: "'I hate him,' you said more times than I could count. It was not what he didn't do, you said. It was what he did. Those touches, his touches you said. And you could not tell your mother. She would not believe you" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 174). In the film, the correspondent character Peter Okemi is not sexually abusing his daughter, but physically abusing her. This alteration prevents reproducing the assumption that people become homosexual due to sexual abuse during childhood, which The Nest criticizes as a prevalent stereotype (The NEST 2015: ix). After the film's climax, when Ziki and Kena have been beaten up by the violent mob, they wait at the police station for their parents (Kahiu 2018: 00:57:03). This reunion and the following events reveal again very drastically their parents' attitudes towards their children. Peter Okemi enters the police station together with his wife and immediately slaps Ziki in the face. Then he orders her to get into the car and she obeys him without resisting. He threatens Kena to stay away from his family. Kena follows them to the car, but Ziki avoids any eye contact with her. Ziki's mother, Rose Okemi, tells Kena: "Haven't you hurt her enough already?" (00:57:62). Instead of blaming the perpetrators, she blames the victim for the violence they had to endure. Ziki's mother is ambiguous. On the one hand, she interrupts the two women kissing in Ziki's room and threatens to tell Kena's mother about it, which leads to them seeking refuge in the abandoned *matatu* (00:51:56). But on the other hand she comforts her daughter and weeps together with her, after Ziki and Kena ended their relationship (01:09:39). Thus Rose shows empathy for her daughter, but not for her daughter's relationship with a wo-

man and detaches the two issues from one another. Even if she commiserates with her daughter, she would not be able to openly show her support and to oppose her husband's decision. She might not only weep for her daughter, but also for herself as she feels suppressed in her marriage and still has to follow her husband's choices to adhere to societal conventions.

John Mwaura reacts differently in comparison to Ziki's parents. As the Okemis leave the police station, he covers his daughter with his jacket and hugs and comforts her. This gesture of love and support stands in huge contrast to the Okemis' reaction. In the next scene John accompanies Kena to her mother's place and enters the place reluctantly, after Kena asks him to (00:58:23). Mercy and John directly start an argument about who is responsible for the violence – and also for Kena's sexual orientation. Mercy insists that it is Kena's and John's fault, but fears that people will make her responsible for it. She angrily shouts at him: "You are the shopkeeper! You are the MCA [Member of the County Assembly]! What am I? A single mother alone who always gets blamed for everything. They will probably blame me for this [Kena's homosexuality] just like they blamed me when you left me" (00:59:31). She raises the issue of gendered power dynamics after the end of a marriage, which has little negative impact on the man but stigmatises women, who are expected to take care of their children on their own. Additionally, although she was not the one who ended the relationship, Kena's mother experiences the burden patriarchal societal structures put upon her in comparison to her former husband. But she does not not correlate the same indignation to this situation and blames Kena for what happened. This depicts that there is not necessarily solidarity among people who experience different forms of oppression. John stresses another perspective on the events and questions the legal status quo in Kenya: "Why don't you save that anger for those guys who almost beat her to death? Hao ndio wanafaa kuwa kwa police station, sio mtoto wetu. (They should be at the police station not our daughter.)" (00:59:15). His positioning as an ally manifests itself in the next encounter between Kena and John in front of his shop (01:04:34). He tears down his own election poster from the walls of his shop, because someone has spray-painted *shoga* (faggot) on them. By this, he symbolically also destroys his chances of winning in the upcoming election. Instead he assures Kena of his fatherly support despite backlash from the society. Kena hugs him tightly and they shed tears together while holding each other.

Mercy, on the other hand, tries to 'cure' Kena of her homosexuality with prayers. The two still live together, but Mercy avoids talking to her daughter. When Kena leaves the apartment, Mercy follows her to the door and attempts to say something, but eventually says nothing (01:03:25). Her inability to converse with her daughter reflects their distant relationship, where much remains unsaid. The moment Kena closes the door to her mother's apartment behind her, it feels like she also liberates herself from her mother's influence and homophobic attitudes. By stepping 'out there' she refuses to hide herself any longer and symbolically starts a new chapter in her life as an outed queer person. It is the last time the mother appears in the film, but later on when Kena hears about Ziki's return to Slopes, she visits her mother's apartment again (01:13:58). Mama Atim's remark in the hospital – "Hapa ndiyo ulikuja kujificha? (Is this where you came to hide?)" (01:12:22) – shows, that Kena has moved away to another part of the city. When she opens the door of her mother's apartment with her key, her greetings remain unanswered because Mercy is not at home. This can be read as her mother's absence in her life, yet their connection is not completely cut off, because Kena still has a key to her mother's apartment. Perhaps they decided not to mention their disagreement any more, like Anyango's mother in "Jambula Tree" who eventually "has gotten over that night" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 164).

3.1.3 Friends

In *Stories of Our Lives*, two episodes – "Run" and "Athman" – deal with the relations of the gay protagonists to their male best friends. In "Run" Pato's homophobic best friend Kama witnesses Pato's visit to a queer night club. In the next scene, he passes by Pato's place to confront him (Chuchu 2014: 00:20:08). When Pato opens the door, Kama directly starts to insult him and to push him down. In a medium shot through the open door, we can see Pato crouching on the floor and Kama slapping him directly in the face. This first punch changes the camera angle: it is now tilted and shows the two from the side. The so called Dutch angle symbolizes how Pato's world has been turned upside down due to Kama's violent reaction. The camera tries to make the viewer empathize with Pato and to visualize not only the physical but also the emotional pain he is going through. A back lighting creates a high contrast of Kama's dark silhouette in front of the bright background and makes him appear even more terrifying. Pato's back is turned to

the camera and he faces the light as he crouches next to his bed. This camera perspective alternates multiple times with close-up shots of Pato's face. The camera is positioned on his eye level, which creates a connection between him and the viewers. An over-the-shoulder shot of Kama would evoke a whole different feeling in the scene: the viewers would look down upon Pato and identify themselves with the perpetrator rather than the victim of the violence.

Figure 3: Dutch angle shot of Kama who heavily beats up Pato (Chuchu 2014: 00:20:39)

Eventually Pato is able to escape from Kama's beating and to run away through the streets of Nairobi (00:21:36). For Henriette Gunkel (2019: 392) this scene references to François Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows*, whereas I felt directly reminded of a sequence in Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life* (2012), in which the main character Mwas escapes extrajudicial police brutality and runs through Nairobi to his 'other' life as an actor in a theatre play (Gitonga 2012: 01:26:01). The two scenes demonstrate a striking similarity: both Mwas and Pato are torn between their double lives – Mwas as a robber and an actor, and Pato as a straight-passing and a homosexual man. Running through the night marks a point of culmination in the films and in their double lives, they not only run away from the violence they have experienced but at the same time they run towards the lives they want to live. Usually, it can be dangerous to be in the streets of Nairobi at night, but this time, it reduces the greater danger of Kama's beating. Similar to the cine-

matic portrayal of mob violence in *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*, Kama's beating forces Pato to leave his old life behind. Thus his run can be seen as an involuntary transition to a new chapter of life. The sequence is interrupted several times by Pato's flashbacks in reverse slow-motion. Short snippets of his good memories dancing in the queer night club alternate with low-angle point-of-view shots from Pato, in which Kama violently beats him up. I follow Henriette Gunkel (2019: 392) who highlights that the visual aesthetics resemble the style of a music video, not least because of the driving electronic non-diegetic beats which accompany the scene. In a voice-over, Pato says that since that day he has never seen Kama again (Chuchu 2014: 00:23:28). Their friendship ended abruptly, Kama turned from a friend into an enemy.

In *Rafiki* both Ziki and Kena have friends who react differently to the romance between the two women. Before Ziki falls in love with Kena, she spends a lot of her time trying out new dance moves in the streets with her friend Elizabeth and another woman only referred to as 'Elizabeth's friend' in the credits. When Elizabeth notices that Kena and Ziki get closer, she physically attacks Kena and calls her names. The short-lasting scene takes place in the inner courtyard of an apartment block and starts with a medium-wide shot of Kena who is bent over to drink from a water tap (Kahiu 2018: 00:50:21). Elizabeth enters the frame and pushes Kena's head from behind against the tap. Kena slowly turns around with a shocked expression on her face, her lips are bleeding. Elizabeth shouts at her: "Stay away from Ziki! Are you a fucking lesbian or something? I see the way you look at her and it's sick" (00:50:27). The handheld camera stays on Kena the whole time and approaches her. We see how the mean words from Elizabeth have hurt her. In a reverse close-up shot, for the first time we see Elizabeth's face, until then we could only hear her voice. She continues to verbally abuse Kena, but her words are cut short when the latter starts a counter attack and pushes Elizabeth to the ground. Visually the attack comes along with a match cut from the close-up of Elizabeth to a medium over-the-shoulder shot of Kena (00:50:41). Kena's reaction is depicted as a moment of empowerment. Unlike previously in the film, where she keeps quiet when Waireri calls Tom names, Kena now fights back. She decides not to endure the hostility towards herself and others any more.

The scene is an adaptation of a similar incident narrated in "Jambula Tree". In the short story, Anyango is being pushed to the ground by her classmate Juma. She tells Sanyo how she remembers the fight: "You coiled them [your feet] around Juma when he

knocked my tooth out for refusing to let him have his way on the water tap when he tried to cheat me out of my turn" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 170). Although transferred to different circumstances, the original storyline is still recognizable. In the short story, Sanyo comes to help Anyango. Similarly, when Kena and Elizabeth roll on the ground fighting, Ziki tries to separate the two together with Elizabeth's friend. While the latter holds back Elizabeth, Ziki puts her hands around Kena and keeps her at distance from Elizabeth. Elizabeth is furious and yells at Ziki: "How can you choose her over me?" (Kahiu 2018: 00:50:59). Ziki has clearly taken sides and the scene marks the end of her friendship with Elizabeth.

In the beginning of *Rafiki*, we get to know Kena's male friends Waireri and Blacksta. Waireri is portrayed as a homophobic man who does not miss out an opportunity to verbally insult the alleged homosexual Tom. He uses the derogative term *shoga* (faggot) to address him and jostles him whenever he passes by (00:05:00). In another scene Waireri endorses physical assault against Tom and makes fun of him (00:36:53). His homophobia results in the non-existent support to his 'friend' Kena and her girlfriend Ziki, when they are beaten up by a mob. Although he does not actively take part in the beating, he is still present and does not intervene, but turns around and leaves. Consequently, this reaction marks the end point of their friendship.

Blacksta is a more ambivalent character. On the one hand, he joins Waireri in making fun of Tom, though without using insulting words. On the other hand, he wants Kena to become his wife and cares for her even after her involuntary outing. There are two scenes in the film where Kena and Blacksta spend time together alone and I will delve deeper into these encounters, because they tell a lot about their friendship. After Ziki and Kena had an argument about secretly holding hands during church service, Kena sits alone outside and seems pensive and melancholic (00:46:57). Blacksta arrives on his motorbike and asks her if she is okay. Kena does not answer, she only slightly shakes her head and looks down. But she does not need to verbalize her feelings, because they understand each other without words and Blacksta does not dig deeper. Instead, he invites her for a ride on his motorbike to relieve her of stress. When Kena gets on the motorbike, the soft non-diegetic song "Nita" by Njoki Karu starts playing in the background and creates a dreamy atmosphere. In Kiswahili, *ni-* is the prefix for the first person singular and *-ta-* the morpheme to express future tense. Consequently, *nita* – which translates to "I will" in English – is a bold title directed towards the future. It can

be understood as a reference to Kena's grappling with her own future as a queer person in Kenya. And also it can be seen as a link to Blacksta's dreams of a future with Kena as a wife. Although part of the precarious *bodaboda* (motorcycle taxi) business in Nairobi, Blacksta decides to sacrifice his time and potential income to cheer up his friend Kena. The friendship is valuable to him, even though he probably also wants to impress Kena to convince her into a relationship with him. The motorbike ride out of the city is visualized in wide tracking shots of the *bodaboda* and in wide, sometimes shaky point-of-view shots of the landscape next to the street. The framing creates a feeling of freedom, as if there were no boundaries for their dreams. Taiwo A. Osinubi points out the metaphorical use of vehicular mobility in the film. According to him, "[t]he use of modes of transportation contribute [sic!] to an overall sense of incompletion in the film as they convey desires for social mobility" (Osinubi 2019: 74). For Blacksta, these desires are "acquiring a job, a mortgage, and Kena as a wife" (Osinubi 2019: 74).

The following sequence shows Kena and Blacksta sitting down on the top of a hill watching the sunset. The lighting is dominated by the colour purple and creates a romantic atmosphere. The vastness of the surrounding environment in comparison to the crowded city mirrors Kena's inner emotional state. While in Nairobi she constantly has to hide her love for Ziki and feels constricted, out here in the nature she experiences freedom and her dreams are valid. A close-up of Kena's face is followed by a close-up of Ziki's face, who turns her head in slow-motion and smiles at her. In another reaction shot, Kena mentions: "I wish we could go somewhere where we could be real" (Kahiu 2018: 00:48:51). Now Blacksta turns his head towards Kena with a confused look on his face and asks: "Real aje tena? (What do you mean 'real'?)" (00:48:55). Forced back to reality, Kena plays it down and the two continue sitting silently next to each other. Much remains unsaid between them, the silence is covered up by the song "Nita", which is still playing in the background. Most lyrics of the song are in English, but the scene ends with the Kiswahili line "Nitatembea nikitegemea... [I will walk depending...]" (00:49:04). Applied to the film, it not only describes the relationship of Kena and Ziki, but also the friendship of Kena and Blacksta. Blacksta as a supporting character in the film seems to depend very much on Kena's attention. At the same time he supports her when she is feeling down. Once they return to the city with the motorbike, the music fades out as street noises slowly fade in. Their plans for the future meet the harsh reality of their daily lives.

In a short scene later in the film, the dependency between Blacksta and Kena is reversed. After Kena and Ziki have been beaten up by the mob and taken to the police station, Kena visits Blacksta at his apartment (01:00:31). The scene is filmed in low-key with huge shadows and hard contrasts. It starts outside of his apartment with a medium shot of the door. Blacksta enters the frame and disappears in the dark in front of his door. For a moment we can hear the noise of his keys and then Kena calls his name from the off. Blacksta turns around and makes a step towards the camera into the light. Once he calls Kena's name, a reverse shot shows her sitting down on the opposite side of the door, half of her face is hidden in the dark. A large dark haematoma is visible on her left cheek, which is facing the light. Her lips show cracks from the beatings. The two walk towards each other and meet next to a grid of the staircase. The grid projects a shadow onto their faces, its regular pattern reminiscent of prison bars. Although spared from prison, Kena's inner self cannot be free in such a violent and homophobic society. Blacksta and Kena approach each other silently, in a close-up shot he puts his arm around her and hugs her tight. Another close-up shows Kena's head leaning on his shoulder and tears coming out of her eyes and running down her cheek. Again, Blacksta does not ask Kena any questions, but I assume this time for different reasons. It is probable his friend Waireri or Mama Atim have already told him about the violent beatings Kena and Ziki had to endure. Thus Blacksta knows about Kena's homosexuality, but he reacts in a different way compared to Waireri. In this scene, Blacksta chooses to support Kena and not to turn away from her like all the other people. The next encounter between the two seems like nothing has happened (01:05:51). As usual Blacksta tries to convince Kena to take a ride on the motorbike with him. She turns down his offer and confesses to him: "Napenda huu dame. (I love that girl)" (01:06:02). Her words immediately change his mood from jokingly to serious. He reacts like a jealous and turned down admirer, yet he does not point out the non-heterosexual characteristic of Kena's and Ziki's relationship, therefore contributing to its acceptance and normalisation. Kena has chosen Ziki over him, but it does not evoke a homophobic insult against the two women. When he ends the conversation and leaves on his motorbike, he also ends the friendship between them.

His last appearance in the film is towards the end, when Kena visits Slopes after she has heard about Ziki's return (01:13:36). A wide shot shows Blacksta and Waireri engaged in a conversation beside the street. Kena enters the frame on a *bodaboda*,

which drops her and leaves. She does not live nearby any more and has distanced herself from her old life and friends. Kena greets the two from afar and in a medium reaction shot of Blacksta, he seems nervous and is biting his lips, but tries to play cool and answers her greetings. The atmosphere between the old friends is distant and Kena does not start further conversation with them.

Figure 4: Athman and Raymond have a conversation about their friendship (Chuchu 2014: 00:32:55)

In the episode "Athman" from *Stories of Our Lives*, the main character Raymond is in love with his best friend Athman (Chuchu 2014: 00:23:49). The two work on a tea farm in rural Kenya, it is the only episode of the film that is not set in an urban environment. By this, the filmmakers oppose prevalent prejudices, which locate queerness only in the cities. The countryside is presented in picturesque wide establishing shots, which connect different scenes and have an amplified sound design. This evokes the feeling, that nature becomes a characterization of Raymond and Athman's friendship and inner emotions. For instance, after Athman has dashed Raymond's romantic hopes, in the next shot, the rustling of tree leaves creates tension echoing their complicated relation (00:33:26). The episode mainly consists of dialogue between the two friends or between Raymond and Athman's girlfriend Fiona. The conversations are almost always filmed in the same way visually, with a frontal, static medium tableau shot. The characters stand or sit next to each other, face the camera, and only sometimes look at each

other from the side during the conversation. Most of the conversations take place outside during work breaks, but the crucial dialogue between Athman and Raymond happens in Raymond's room (00:27:46). Therefore the scene is in high contrast to the bright scenes which are filmed outside. The lighting in the scene is low-key and it sets a melancholic mood. Most parts of the room are covered in darkness, the main source of light seems to be a bulb on the ceiling. The vertical immersion of light creates shadows in the character's eye sockets and hides their eyes in the darkness, resembling Raymond hiding himself in his room.

In the beginning we see Raymond sitting alone on his bed, then Athman enters his room and tells him: "Kila msee ako nje. (Everyone's outside)" (00:27:59). Raymond does not answer or react to Athman's words, he is lost in thought. He has literally not 'come out' to the others. Athman sits down next to him on the bed and they start talking. The following conversation is filmed with the shot reverse shot technique, though not in a classical way from the front, but from diagonal back. The two men sit on the left and right side of the image respectively, their faces are shown in profile only. This camera positioning violates the 180-degree-rule, which defines that the camera needs to be placed in a room on a certain axis. The first medium shot shows them frontally and Athman sits on the left side and Raymond on the right side of the image, while during the shot reverse shot sequence, they switch positions. Sometimes the 180-degree-rule is intentionally violated to create disorientation. I cannot determine whether in this case it was neglected out of practical reasons on set or whether it was a deliberate choice by the filmmakers to not follow the rule. Perhaps they attempted to visualize Raymond's emotional state, who indeed feels disoriented in life.

Athman tries to comfort Raymond and tells him he is straight, almost in an apologetic way. But he cannot cheer up Raymond who says: "Sijui nini itaniumiza zaidi: Kukuona kila siku. Ama kukosa kukuona. (I don't know what will hurt more. Seeing you every day or never seeing you again)" (00:30:47). When Athman talks about Raymond's love for him, he always uses the term *hii stori* (this thing) and avoids calling it by its name. Their conversation depicts how difficult it is – even in the private sphere among close friends – to talk about homosexuality, because it is labelled a taboo. Athman is unsure about how to deal with Raymond's affection. But he is supportive and caring, which makes Raymond more comfortable to open up to his friend. The shot-reverse-shot sequence ends when they both sit silently next to each other. The camera

framing is the same frontal tableau shot like at the beginning of the scene. After a moment of silence, Raymond asks Athman: “Naeza kukiss? (Can I kiss you?)” (00:32:30). Athman looks confused and surprised, he does not answer, but excuses himself to join the others outside for dinner.

The next day Raymond decides to leave the farm, because constantly seeing Athman and his girlfriend Fiona hurts him too much. His departure is marked by a fade-in of atmospheric music, while the diegetic sounds slowly disappear (00:36:33). The following sequence is edited in a parallel way and contrasts Raymond, who packs his belongings and leaves the farm, and Athman, who unsuccessfully runs after him to hold him back. The cross-cutting sequence starts with a static wide shot of the tea plantation, which is tilted and not levelled like the other landscape shots before (00:36:38). Raymond’s world is out of balance. On the audio layer the trees’ leaves rustle in the wind, like they want to warn of an upcoming storm. The same moment Raymond opens the gate of the tea farm to leave, Athman opens the door to Raymond’s empty room (00:38:38). It shows that the bond between the two friends is still there, they think of each other, and the editing connects them. In the last moments of the episode, the dynamics between them have reverted: it is no longer Raymond who chases after Athman, but Athman who runs after Raymond to convince him to stay. But it is too late, Raymond has already left on a *matatu*, and Athman can only close the compound’s gate and symbolically also the chapter of his life, which he shared with his friend Raymond (00:39:34).

In both *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*, friendship among the queer main characters and their heterosexual friends is portrayed in diverse and sometimes ambivalent ways. The two films feature heterosexual characters who react very differently when they learn about the queerness of their friends. While some stay supportive and continue to value the friendship, others turn away or even engage in physical assault against the former. Sometimes the lines between allies and enemies are blurred and characters cannot be clearly categorized. This multifaceted portrayal of friendship shows the complexity of human relations and the different stories which need to be told without reproducing stereotypes. Apart from rejection and support, the friends have many ways to position themselves in between those opposing poles.

3.2 Structures

> Dear Kenyan Queer: You are not alone. Whether you're a man or a woman, whether you're somewhere in between or somewhere beyond; you exist. You might feel small and fragile in the face of Statues, Laws, Caucuses, Stones, Insults, a Church-State and Family that tries to deny your existence, but you exist. You must never let them take that away. (The Nest 2015: xi)

In *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*, the queer characters navigate their lives influenced by various structural forces. They not only maintain relations to their close family and friends, but they are also part of larger social systems, including acquaintances from the neighbourhood or from church who are not necessarily well disposed to them. Additionally, the Kenyan state and its homophobic legislation constantly threatens their lives. In the following, I will discuss recurrent structural patterns which have an impact on the protagonists, assigned to the topics 'state and society' and 'religion and tradition'.

Black feminist scholars like Angela Davis (1981) and others have coined the term 'triple oppression' to describe the intersectionality of different forms of discrimination, precisely sexism, racism, and classism. As discussed before, (hetero-)sexism is a major topic in the two films, yet the concepts of class and race and their consequences for the films' lead characters are equally represented in some of the stories, albeit in more subtle ways. Hence in the last part of this chapter, I will delve into the cinematic representations of these two forms of oppression and division.

3.2.1 State and Society

The two films have different ways of depicting threats and pressure from government and society. In *Rafiki* the omnipresence of surveillance is shown through the recurrent image of a helicopter. Its first occurrence is prominently placed in the opening sequence of the film (Kahiu 2018: 00:02:35). The first three minutes consist of a parallel montage sequence to the Afro-pop song "Suzie Noma" by Muthoni Drummer Queen. The sequence is edited at a fast pace in the rhythm of the song, which gives the feeling of a music video. It consists of establishing shots from the middle-class neighbourhood Slopes, with wide shots of the buildings alternating with close-ups of street life scenes like sharpening knifes, sewing clothes, cutting *sukuma wiki* (collard greens) and *pilipili* (chili peppers), playing games, peeling potatoes and shaving beard. We are also intro-

duced to the main character Kena on a skateboard. The hand-held camera shows a lot of movement and creates a feeling of rush and livelihood. This collage is interrupted several times by opening credits of cast and crew on colourful background with small illustrations, which already sets the colour scheme of the film. The helicopter is filmed from below and could be a seen as a point-of-view shot of the people in Kena's neighbourhood or even herself. It is not just visible but also audible on the sound layer, overlapping with the music and placed just before the chorus, which also adds emphasis to the helicopter. The second shot of a helicopter is visually similar to the first one and marks the end of a short scene in which Kena and Ziki exchange some hidden glances (00:12:33). Thus, the helicopter seems like a subtle comment on the forbidden relationship developing between the two women. And like before the noise of the rotor blades interrupts a song playing in the background, as if to remind the people in the streets that the government is present and observes everyone. The last appearance of the helicopter is framed differently to the other two (00:42:07). We can see a panorama shot of Nairobi's skyline, the image is horizontally divided by the horizon into two equal parts. From the upper left part the helicopter crosses the frame against the backdrop of the blue sky. Its noise is already audible before it enters the shot and the stereo sound makes its position distinguishable. The roaring sound comes after a quiet intimate scene of Kena and Ziki having sex in the *matatu*. The harsh contrast of a close framing in the *matatu* followed by a panorama shot adds to the feeling of disruption of their relationship by the authorities, in this case represented by the helicopter.

In scenes which take place in Kena's apartment block, she is framed behind the handrails of the staircase or from the floor below or above (00:25:17, 00:50:52). To me it feels like the gazes from her neighbours, who constantly watch her and everything she does. In combination with the helicopter, she seems to be monitored not only in public spaces, but also in the privacy of her apartment block.

In *Stories of Our Lives*, the Kenyan government and its homophobic legislation are especially portrayed in the last episode of the film titled "Each Night I Dream" (Chuchu 2014: 00:48:39). The episode starts with a black screen and we can hear the beginning of a television news report in which the politician Irungu Kang'ata is talking about homosexuality in Kenya. After a few sentences, the title of the episode appears on the black screen, followed by a reaction shot of the main character Liz and her partner Achieng who are sitting on a sofa and watching the speech. Throughout the speech, the

image switches between them and a shot of the television screen. During the speech, Achieng gets up from the sofa and leaves. It seems she cannot stand the homophobic insults by the politician any more. He is framed in the right corner, while Liz sits on the left side of the image. The framing in combination with the cross-cutting evokes the feeling of a conversation between Liz and the politician. But Liz cannot tell her own thoughts and feelings, she is forced to listen to the politician and to remain voiceless. This is symbolic for the discourse in Kenyan media and society where queer Kenyans do not have a voice and are rarely listened to. Instead, politicians compare homosexuality to terrorism and the current president Uhuru Kenyatta publicly declares that gay rights are 'of no importance' in Kenya. In the film, Irungu Kang'ata holds a long monologue:

> Our attention has been drawn to the recent promotion of gay activities in Kenya and also in Africa in general. For instance, we have seen severally here in Nairobi, people going to hotels, saying that they do support 'gayism'. We have also seen demonstrations within Nairobi, and also in Mombasa, people saying that they do support 'gayism'. We have also seen situations where some writers have gone publicly, saying that they are gays. And we have noted there is no action that is being taken by the Government of Kenya. We do not support 'gayism' and as a result of that we are going to mobilize our people to fight against 'gayism' in the entire Republic. We are also calling upon the police to arrest any person who is promoting 'gayism' in Kenya. If the police does not do so, the law allows citizens to effect arrest. And that is exactly what we are going to do. We are going to do citizens' arrest against gays. (Chuchu 2014: 00:48:39)

In the foreword of the book *Stories of Our Lives*, the authors address the 'anti-gay brigade' with the words: "And for the record, 'gayism' is not a real word. Stop it." (The NEST 2015: x). This feels like a response to the politician in their film who uses the word five times in his short monologue. He refers to the coming-out of the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina and not only calls for the arrest of queer people, but also for mob justice. The monologue anticipates the thematic focus of the episode. As the title already suggests, Liz dreams of different ways to escape the growing tension and hostility towards queer people in the country. The first dream sequence starts with a medium top-shot of Liz and Achieng lying in their bed covered in a blanket. While her girlfriend is asleep, Liz watches her and we can hear Liz' thoughts as a voice-over: "Kila night me hushangaa kenye tutado ile day watatukujia. (Every night I worry about what we will do when they come for us.)" (Chuchu 2014: 00:50:22). As Liz turns around and closes her eyes, loud indistinct chatter slowly fades in on the audio layer. It is followed by a quick cross-cutting between a shot of Liz, Achieng and other presumptively queer

friends, and footage of anti-gay-demonstrations and mob riots. Liz and her friends gather in the streets armed with wooden branches and stones, fiercely looking at their enemies, while the mob burns tires and houses. When they set a house on fire, the next shot is hand-held and in slow-motion, the camera follows Liz and Achieng who are running away from their home. Again this sequence is inter-cut several times with footage of anti-gay-protests. The cross-cutting is emphasized by the loudness of the sound, which is amplified when the footage of riots and protests appears. Thus the disruption and threat to their lives becomes very discernible to the viewer. By using original footage from riots, the filmmakers create a link from their fiction film to real life dangers queer people face in Kenya. The dream ends with a fade out of the indistinct chatter and another top-shot of Liz and Achieng lying in bed. This time Liz faces the camera (and the viewer) directly and continues her statement – what they would do when their enemies come for them – by posing a question and summarizing her dream: "Tutapigana ama tutahepa? (Will we fight? Or will we run?)" (00:50:55). Usually in conventional fiction films, the actors and actresses do not look directly into the camera as it unveils its presence and destroys the illusion of a closed cinematic space. By looking into the camera Liz breaks the so called fourth wall between the actress and the audience. But at the same time she also creates a bond with the (queer) audience who she addresses directly and who ask themselves the same question: will we fight or will we run?

Figure 5: Liz breaks the fourth wall by looking directly into the camera (Chuchu 2014: 00:50:55)

In the foreword of their book, The NEST Collective explicitly addresses queer Kenyans: “Even though we do not know you, and even though we didn’t get to meet you and hear your story, understand what we mean when we say: you are not alone, and this is your story, too” (The NEST 2015: xi). So the collective uses the storytelling in both the book and the film to show solidarity and empower queer people, and involve them by directly addressing them. The queer Kenyan viewers and readers might see themselves in the stories as they face similar challenges in their daily lives given the constant hostility by state and society. The episode “Each Night I Dream” ends with another dream of Liz in which she imagines a mob gathering in front of their apartment (Chuchu 2014: 00:55:13). As the people climb up the stairs, indistinct chatter like in the beginning is audible, and again the images are inter-cut with close-ups of Liz’ face. Angry people knock on their door and demand to see the two women. The group is led by an *askari* (watchman) in uniform, who identifies Liz and Achieng. In Liz’ dream the two are lucky, because Liz had changed her sex by walking backwards around the *Mũgumo* tree (cf. chapter 3.2.2 Religion and Tradition) and proves that she has the body of a man by letting down her pants. This saves them from potential mob violence.

In *Rafiki*, Ziki and Kena are confronted with mob violence as well, but they are not as lucky as Liz and Achieng. While Ziki and Kena exchange hidden kisses during the night in the abandoned *matatu*, suddenly their safe space is invaded (Kahiu 2018: 00:54:28). The invasion begins on the audio layer: while we see a close-up shot of the two women kissing, suddenly they are interrupted by the noise of the car door being opened. They startle and look into the faces of Mama Atim and her daughter Nduta. Mama Atim calls up more people to come closer and to remove Ziki and Kena from the *matatu*. As the mob approaches, indistinct chatter becomes louder and some people bang with their hands on the rear window of the *matatu*. The noise in conjunction with the darkness of the night creates tension. Ziki and Kena hold hands while they are being pushed away from the *matatu* by an angry mob. At some point their hands slip away from each other, and in that same moment the image speed reduces to slow motion, before it returns back to normal speed. With the decrease in the tempo, the voices from the crowd become silent and we only hear heavy breathing from Kena or Ziki. The shaky hand-held camera which is following the group emphasizes the hectic and unpredictable dangerous situation the two women are in. They are beaten up by the mob and left on the ground between dirt and trash. As they are lying on the ground, Kena is able to lift

up her head and she spots her ‘friend’ Waireri, who is part of the mob. In a long-lasting point-of-view shot from Kena we can see him turning his back on her and leaving, although Kena shouts his name. Then an *askari* appears in the frame with a desperate look on his face. We can hear Kena’s fast breathing, while the shouting of the mob sounds distant, although they are still around her. The focus of the camera shifts back and forward, to imitate how Kena’s eyes are trying to focus and to make sense of what is happening around her. Unlike in *Stories of Our Lives*, this time the *askari* prevents the mob from further harming Kena and he tries to protect her, while we hear police sirens in the distance. The point-of-view perspective of Kena intensifies the mob violence and makes the audience go through the same pain Kena does. The film explicitly shows her perspective and not the one of the perpetrators. A point-of-view shot from one of them would evoke the feeling to be part of the mob beating up Kena and Ziki, which is obviously not intended by the filmmakers.

A hard cut brings us to a police station (00:56:36). Kena and Ziki both sit on a bench in the reception room, but distant from each other. Although the two women have been beaten up and they are bleeding from wounds in their faces, the police officers do not show any empathy towards them. The two police officers as representatives of the state are depicted as antagonists to the queer protagonists. The portrayal of hierarchy and power is conveyed by visual means. In the opening shot of the scene, the camera is positioned in an over-the-shoulder shot behind the police officers and slightly tilted downwards to achieve a high-angle framing. Ziki and Kena sit down in the background and are obliged to look up at the police officers, who are standing behind their reception counter. This shows the lack of agency Kena and Ziki have confronted with the authorities. The officers only laugh and make fun of them. They ask Kena and Ziki: “Kati nyie wawili nataka kujua: nani ndiyo ndume? (Between the two of you: which one of you is the man?)” (00:56:36). The question shows how heterosexual people try to conform queer relationships into straight dynamics. In the episode “Ask Me Nicely” in *Stories of Our Lives*, the headmistress orders Kate and Faith to her office and asks them the same: “I have just one question for you: who is the man?” (Chuchu 2014: 00:04:17). A reaction shot shows the two girls, who respond very differently to this outrageous question. Kate angrily shakes her head and looks at the floor, while Faith keeps eye contact with the headmistress and presses her lips. Both reactions show that it may not be the first time, they have been asked this question. In both films, the question is imposed by vir-

tue of the power structure. The two couples did not choose to be interrogated by the headmistress and the police officers, respectively. They must endure the painful questions, because they are not in a position to decide on their own how they want to be seen as homosexual women. This reflects their incapability of self-representation in a heteronormative society, where power structures are exploited to their disadvantage. When the headmistress suspends Kate from school, she gives her a warning: “Be very very careful. You are not a man” (Chuchu 2014: 00:06:02). In contrast to masculine expression, which is tolerated to some extent, overt same-sex affection by women leads in the films to a backlash from society.

Earlier in *Rafiki*, physical violence against queer people is already addressed and the subtle reference is a prevision of what is going to happen to Ziki and Kena later on. In the scene set in the evening, the two women are having a drink together with Kena’s friends Blacksta and Waireri, when Tom, the alleged homosexual guy, passes by their table (Kahiu 2018: 00:36:53). He has a plaster on his left cheek and limps, and it seems like he has pain in his legs while walking. It is likely he has been beaten up out of homophobia. Just like the police officers in the other scene, Waireri only makes fun of Tom and verbally abuses him with homophobic slurs. The latter does not even react to the mean words, it seems he is used to constant insults from society. Ziki and Kena exchange troubled looks, but do not speak up against the injustice. However Kena leaves the table as a sign of silent protest and Ziki soon follows her.

Mama Atim is an important antagonist to Ziki and Kena and she is very present throughout the film. She is the gossip from the neighbourhood and runs a small restaurant together with her daughter Nduta. She is depicted as the personification of homophobia in Kenyan society. Thus I will explore in depth her role and function in the film. Mama Atim’s first appearance is in the very beginning of the film, when Kena and her friends Blacksta and Waireri play cards in front of Mama Atim’s restaurant (00:04:09). Her restaurant is very much connected to the colour red: the walls, an umbrella, the letters of the menu on the wall, the counter, a blanket on the chair, and even the thermos and Mama Atim’s skirt are all red. The colour red is commonly associated with danger and in films it is often the colour of the antagonist (Kress/Van Leeuwen 2002). So the use of this colour scheme already from the beginning establishes Mama Atim and her daughter as Kena’s enemies. They are the ones who notice that Ziki and Kena going on a date (00:27:05) and later on disturb them kissing in the abandoned *matatu* (00:54:28).

While Ziki and Kena are being beaten up, Mama Atim and Nduta do not actively participate in the beating. Instead they stand aside and watch the violence with serious looks on their faces (00:55:49). It seems like they feel a little pity for the two women, but at the same time consider the violence as a necessary lesson for them.

Figure 6: Red colour scheme of Mama Atim's restaurant (Kahiu 2018: 00:07:05)

During the process of adapting the short story "Jambula Tree" by the Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko into a full-length film script, Mama Atim is the only character whose name has not been changed. Atim is a name from the Acholi people in Northern Uganda and means "[b]orn away from ancestral home" (Amone 2014: 20). In Kenya, Atim is a Luo name, which translates to "I do" (Isingoma 2014: 87). This meaning reflects her confident, straightforward behaviour. Mama Atim's significance in the film is already based on her importance in the short story. "Jambula Tree" is written as a narration by Anyango (Kena) to Sanyu (Ziki), while the former is a nurse and the latter has been sent to London after the two became intimate under the jambula tree and were caught by Mama Atim. In the story, Anyango has heard about Sanyu's return and recounts their shared memories. In the film, the last scenes in the hospital (01:11:40) and afterwards when Kena returns to Slopes are set in the same time as the short story. While the film has a chronological narration, the short story contains several flashbacks. In "Jambula Tree" Mama Atim is introduced by Anyango as a woman with a "quack-

quack-quack-mouth" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 164), who gossips about everyone and who tells her about Sanyu's return, just like in the film. But unlike in *Rafiki*, in the story, Mama Atim is described as a housewife, who "waits for her husband to bring the food she is to cook each night" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 168) and Anyango wonders, why Mama Atim does not look for a job for herself in the industrial area or at the second hand clothes market. In the film, Mama Atim has a restaurant and is financially independent. She is as an emancipated and strong woman, just like most of the other female characters in *Rafiki*. To me it seems like a conscious artistic decision from Wanuri Kahiu to portray Mama Atim in a way that supports the feminist message of the film. When Kena orders *chapati madondo* (flatbread with beans) at Mama Atim's small restaurant by the roadside, we catch a glimpse of the two men who are working for her (00:07:11). Mama Atim's daughter Nduta rudely orders one of them to bring the beans, while the other one is cooking *chapati* on a *jiko* (charcoal stove). In Mama Atim's restaurant, she is the one in charge and collects the money, and her male workers have to follow her orders. Obviously this duty to obey arises from the workplace dynamics, and not from gender affiliations, yet having men working for her instead of vice versa can be considered an attempt not to reproduce gender imbalance on screen.

Apart from the different profession, Mama Atim is described in similar ways in both the short story and the film. In the written version, one night she catches the two girls naked under the jambula tree in front of her house. Anyango refers to the incident two times in the story (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 166, 176f.) but talks only indirectly about it. This might hint at the shame which is attached to lesbian love by society and which makes it hard to talk about. In the film, it is the abandoned *matatu* in which Mama Atim finds Kena and Ziki kissing. The change of places could be caused by a re-localization from Uganda to Kenya in the adaptation phase, because jambula trees are very common in Uganda, while *matatus* are usually associated with Kenya, although of course minibuses do exist in Uganda and elsewhere on the continent as well. In his article about the theory of adaptation, Robert Stam notes that the discourse about filmic adaptation of novels often comes with the emphasis on what has been lost in the process of adaptation, and not was has been gained (Stam 2005: 3). According to Joseph M. Boggs and Dennis W. Petrie, "[u]sually the filmmaker must limit not only the depth to which a character can be explored but also the actual numbers of characters treated" (Boggs/Petrie 2008: 442). In our case, *Rafiki* is not based on a novel, but on a short story, which

gives the possibility to extend thoughts and plot lines only mentioned briefly in “Jambula Tree”.

In the short story, Anyango learns from Mama Atim that Sanyu has come back from London. In the film, this remark is developed into a crucial scene between Mama Atim and Kena towards the end of the film (Kahiu 2018: 01:11:40). Kena now works at a hospital and Mama Atim is one of her patients. The scene starts with two wide establishing shots of Nairobi’s skyline and the outside of the hospital’s accidents-and-emergencies unit. In a long following shot of Kena in the hospital ward, we notice that for the first time in the film, she has grown her hair longer and wears an Afro with a side-cut. This is an indicator that some time has passed after Ziki has left for London. The walls of the hospital are painted green, the same colour which is associated throughout the film with Kena and her father. It reflects that Kena has made the hospital her home and she moves comfortably in her space. Kena walks down the hallway and checks on different patients, then the follower shot is interrupted by a hard cut and the next image shows Mama Atim lying in a hospital bed and covered in a red blanket. Again, Mama Atim has interrupted Kena’s life, but as Taiwo A. Osinubi rightfully states, this time the power dynamics between the two are reversed: “Because accidents and emergencies interrupt and reorder the habitual order of things and portend the suspension and refashioning of hierarchies, Mama Atim’s medical emergency implies a diagnosis of discriminatory public discourse” (Osinubi 2019a: 75). After Mama Atim has told Kena about Ziki’s return from London, Kena closes the curtain around her bed and cuts her short. This time, she has the power to end the conversation and to exclude Mama Atim from her life. Osinubi sees the scene in the hospital as an echo of the scenes of violence in the film and to him this encounter suggests the possibility of regeneration. But although Mama Atim – as a representative of the homophobic part of the Kenyan society – is a patient and in need of Kena’s help, she refuses to get treatment from the latter. In my opinion, this symbolizes the ongoing denial of acceptance of queer people in society, with no prospect of reconciliation.

3.2.2 Religion and Tradition

In his beautifully written and well-argued book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019), the queer theological scholar Adriaan van Klinken explores the relationship between Christianity and queerness in Kenya. He problematizes the depiction of religion as inherently homophobic and offers four interdisciplinary case studies, one of them being a close reading of the book *Stories of Our Lives*. He reaches to the conclusion that the book "presents plenty of examples of alternative interpretations of biblical texts and understandings of God and Christ" (Van Klinken 2019: 195). A whole chapter in the book is dedicated to 'Religion and Spirituality' (The NEST 2015: 301ff.). The stories are diverse and range from people who identify as Christian or Muslim to atheists who oppose the major religions due to their homophobic tendencies, and people who call themselves spiritual, but are not connected to Christianity or Islam. This variety of stories dismantles the prevalent stereotype that constructs an opposition between queerness and religion, and paints a more nuanced picture as opposed to rigid dichotomies.

Unlike in the book, religion is not a major topic in the film *Stories of Our Lives*, and it is only referenced a few times indirectly. In the episode "Each Night I Dream", a homophobic politician condemns 'gayism' as "against our culture, against our tradition, against all our religious beliefs" (Chuchu 2014: 00:56:14). In his speech, he imagines a homogeneous and monolith country, which opposes homosexuality. In the episode "Run", the homophobic character Kama calls a queer night club 'Sodom', a metaphor of the biblical city by the same name which is associated with sin and doom (00:14:50). The term sodomy, which refers to anal intercourse, equally derives from the name of this city. Eddie Ombagi highlights the use of the same biblical metaphor shortly after: "Kama makes a joke that if you turn back [to the queer night club] you will turn into salt, an apparent reference to Lot's wife in the Biblical myth of Sodom and Gomorrah" (Ombagi 2019a: 266). According to the bible, God destroys Sodom with a huge fire because of the evil of its inhabitants. Kama is furious about the gay men in front of the night club and says he could burn them (Chuchu 2014: 00:15:12). This threat to kill could be interpreted as another reference to the biblical story. In the Kenyan context, it may be interpreted literally, because mob justice where people are burned alive is prevalent. When Kama finds out about Pato's sexual orientation, he beats him up in his room. We see a necklace with a pendant in the form of a cross dangling from Kama's

neck (00:20:36). He might wear the cross purely as fashion statement and not out of religious belief, but considering the biblical references he uses before it is more likely that he is Christian. Interestingly, for a moment we catch a glimpse of another cross on the wall in Pato's room (00:19:35). This might be an indication that Pato identifies as a Christian as well, which is an interesting twist. As a queer person he has reconciled religion and his sexual orientation or at least does not see the two as mutually exclusive. On the other hand, the cross on his wall could also be an attempt to cover up his homosexuality. Just like in the written testimonies on which the film is based, the film complicates the link between Christianity and homosexuality, and does not necessarily see the two as opposite poles.

Figure 7: Kena and Ziki have to endure a homophobic sermon in church (Kahiu 2018: 00:45:14)

In *Rafiki*, church service is portrayed as a unifying occasion where all the people from the neighbourhood pray together. The sermon is not only limited to religious matters, but also open for communal issues. The priest mentions good deeds by individuals and after the service people stay to chat or to congratulate members on their newborn babies. It is a place where the gossip Mama Atim, the queer guy Tom, and even the political rivals Peter Okemi and John Mwaura – Ziki's and Kena's fathers – gather and sit next to each other (Kahiu 2018: 00:13:17). Interestingly, the two opponents carry names of apostles, who are known from the bible for healing other people. But as Taiwo

A. Osinubi notes, Peter Okemi and John Mwaura “are not about to collaborate or save anyone soon” (Osinubi 2019a: 72f.). Later in the film, when they learn about the sexual orientation of their daughters, they react very differently to it. With their biblical names the two men can be seen as archetypes with contradictory religious standpoints regarding homosexuality. In the film, the church service is depicted as a recurrent event which is not always easy to endure for queer people. One day, the priest condemns homosexuality in his sermon and tries to prove his point with a quotation from the bible:

> Hivyo Mungu aliwaacha wafuate tamaa zao za aibu, hata wanawake wakabadili matumizi ya asili kwa asili isiyo ya asili. Waelewa? Wanaume nao vivyo hivyo waliyaacha matumizi ya mke, ya asili, wakawakiana tamaa, wanaume wakiyatenda yasiyowapasa, wakapata nafsini mwao malipo ya upotevu wao yaliyo haki yao.
> (God left them to follow their shameful desires. Even women changed their natural ways to unnatural ways. Understand? And men did the same thing. They left women for unnatural ways and desired other men. They did shameful things with other men. And as a result of their sin they suffered.) (Kahiu 2018: 00:45:39)

The biblical passage he cites is Romans 1:26-27. In the book *Stories of Our Lives*, one lesbian woman narrates that she has been confronted with this bible reference as well (Van Klinken 2019: 128). Another popular quotation to allegedly verify that homosexuality is unchristian, is Leviticus 20:13 (“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them”), but this one only refers to male non-heterosexuality. The passage which Ziki and Kena are obliged to listen to also speaks about non-heterosexual women and their ‘shameful desires’. During the priest’s sermon, we can see medium reaction shots of the congregation. The queer guy Tom seems uncomfortable, but maintains an indefinite and emotionless facial expression (Kahiu 2018: 00:45:07). Ziki is in a playful mood and tries to secretly hold hands with Kena. A close-up shows how Kena refuses her gentle touch and pushes the hand away (00:45:42). Her reaction emphasises the fact that the church is not a safe place for them. The priest’s words off-screen appear like a threatening commentary on their relationship. In the book *Stories of Our Lives*, several queer people tell of similar experiences of what they sometimes have to endure during service. One is rather unimpressed by this: “In our church, we have guys in the praise and worship team who are gay – even some of the ushers are gay – then suddenly the pastor starts condemning gay people, talking about how we’ll burn in hell, saying we’re so immoral, so unnatural. It gets really awkward. I’m used to it though, I know in the

end it's just me and my God" (The NEST 2015: 305). Another one feels more affected and therefore does not go to church any more: "Mostly in Protestant churches, you get pastors who condemn homosexuals. It hurts me. It makes me feel isolated, like I'm not like anyone else" (The NEST 2015: 306). These two disparate reactions towards homophobia in church describe two possible coping strategies for religious queer people. They either endure and try to ignore the hate speech or they avoid going to church. In *Rafiki*, Ziki, Kena, and Tom attend the service and seem to be affected in different ways: while the joyful Ziki secretly tries to hold hands with Kena and does not listen to the priest's words, Kena and Tom appear more serious and introverted during the sermon. Of course it is also important to differentiate between the various Christian churches in Kenya. Pastors from Pentecostal churches are on the forefront of agitation against homosexuality; yet Kenyan religious leaders from the Anglican and the Catholic church have equally advocated against it (Van Klinken 2019: 28). But there is also a contrasting example: in one of his case studies, Adriaan van Klinken presents the Cosmopolitan Affirming Church, a queer community church in Nairobi (Van Klinken 2019: 143ff.). In *Rafiki*, the filmmakers depict a priest who offers prayer sessions to 'heal' people from homosexuality, thus I assume he belongs to a Pentecostal church.

When Kena's mother learns about her daughter's sexual orientation, she directly concludes, that demons must have possessed her child (Kahiu 2018: 01:00:01). Consequently, the following scene shows an exorcism ceremony in church. It opens with a medium shot of Kena looking directly in the camera, while different people have placed their hands on her head and the priest is speaking a prayer (01:01:27). It feels like there is a bond established between Kena and the viewers, because the camera is positioned at eye-level. Kena kneels, while the other people around her stand. This shows that they are the ones in power, and Kena is passive and must endure the procedure. She does so without batting an eyelid. Her mother and other women surround her and pray in low voices. In the last shot of the sequence, Kena closes her eyes, like she dreams herself away from this place. In the next scene she wakes up in her bed, but the church is still present, even in her private space: as Kena opens her eyes, we hear the church bell ringing from afar (01:02:18). In the book *Stories of Our Lives*, one lesbian women narrates a similar experience. In university, her Christian room-mates found out about her sexual orientation, prayed for her and made her think that she has been possessed by a demon, which she believed for a very long time (The NEST 2015: 309f.). On the con-

trary, Kena does not seem to be very much affected by the prayers. The sequence of exorcism is rather short and ends as abruptly as it starts. How she gets into this situation and how she gets out of it is not shown. This elliptic way of storytelling situates the religious scene as disconnected to and without much impact on her future life as an outed queer person.

While Christianity is very present in the film, there is only one reference to Islam, when Kena and Ziki use a *tuktuk* (auto rickshaw) to go on their first date (Kahiu 2018: 00:26:56). Unlike in cities like Mombasa, a *tuktuk* is an uncommon mean of public transport in Nairobi framing their first date as something special. As the they enter the *tuktuk*, the female driver is visible in a medium shot. In a highly male dominated industry, unfortunately, a female driver is still an exception. Thus, I see it as a feminist statement by the filmmakers that the power of change lies in the hand of a woman. The scene begins with soft non-diegetic guitar music and singing, which continues throughout the scene and later in the night club. The street sound that is audible in the beginning slowly fades out when Ziki and Kena start their journey with the *tuktuk*. Only their togetherness matters to them and the outside world is of no importance any more. The driver's headscarf is made of *kitenge* fabric and can be seen as a Muslim *hijab*. Perhaps Wanuri Kahiu wants to challenge the common narrative and stereotype of homophobic Islam and sees some Muslims as part of the queer struggle for freedom and liberation.

Figure 8: Ziki and Kena enter a tuktuk driven by a woman with headscarf (Kahiu 2018: 00:27:04)

In *Stories of Our Lives*, we see that belief can empower queer people and help them to cope with their hostile environment. In "Each Night I Dream", Liz remembers in a dream a traditional[3] myth from her ethnic group, the Gĩkũyũ (Chuchu 2012: 00:52:55). In a voice-over she explains that there is the belief, when you walk backwards seven times around the sacred *Mũgumo* tree, your sex will change. By this she refers to the myth of 'Wacici the herd boy', a story about a young boy who had to look after his father's cattle, which he failed to do and was therefore beaten by his father (Karangi 2008). In the story, Wacici noticed that his sister, who was helping their mother with the domestic work, was never beaten and regretted that he was not born a girl. The myth continues as follows:

> One day, […] [h]e was told this particular story of how one girl went round the *Mũgumo* tree seven times and turned into a boy. Wacici was really impressed even though those other boys refused to take him to the *Mũgumo* tree. Their fathers had prohibited them since it was here that Ngai of the Gĩkũyũ lived. Wacici did not hesitate (*ndarĩire marigu*) and went there alone. After going round the *Mũgumo* seven times, he turned into a girl. He was very happy from that day, he never looked after the cattle again and thus escaped the beatings of his father. (Karangi 2008: 126)

The dream sequence in the film is set in the dark night, only the huge *Mũgumo* tree is illuminated, which creates a mystical atmosphere. It opens with a wide low-angle shot of Liz, standing in front of the tree with her back facing the camera and looking up to the branches. The next image is a reverse top shot and it feels like the tree is looking back at Liz. The camera angle and framing personifies the tree and emphasises its supernatural power. We can hear soft violin music, and heavy breathing, artificially altered with an echo and slightly out of sync. Henriette Gunkel (2019: 396) remarks that the non-diegetic soundscape refers to the character of Liz and makes her inner feelings perceptible for the listener. In contrast, I got the feeling, that it is not Liz, but the sacred tree which is breathing, again contributing to its personification. The following shot is a tracking low-angle point-of-view shot of Liz, who starts to walk backwards around the tree and looks up to its crown. Throughout the whole scene edited in slow-motion, the camera switches between Liz' perspective, the tree's perspective, and a 'neutral' observational view point. Wide and medium shots alternate with close-up shots of her shoes and hands

3 I follow Matthew M. Karangi who notes that 'traditional' "does not mean […] 'frozen' in time and space or an iconological continuity with some remote 'idyllic' past but rather that which is seen as reconfiguring with time, situation and space and thus in fluidity" (Karangi 2008: 130).

trying to steady herself by holding onto the tree's trunk. Suddenly a flutter sound effect signalizes that something has changed. Sound change is the first indication that she has transitioned into a man. Liz stops walking backwards and raises her head towards the treetop. The change of her sex is visualized by a change of her hair style: it is now cut short giving her an androgynous appearance. Henriette Gunkel understands the backwards movement as an alternative perception of time and progress, because it "refuses a western teleological understanding, an always forward moving self-conceptualization of an international LGBTIQ politics, in which, for example the coming out is often celebrated as a generally liberating moment" (Gunkel 2019: 394). Liz does not walk towards the future, but rather towards the past. Matthew M. Karangi points out that "the traditional Gĩkũyũ cosmology [has] an implicit closeness and interconnectedness between people, trees, sexuality and gender" (Karangi 2008: 117). By using a traditional myth to question the construction of sex and gender, the filmmakers not only break up the rigid dichotomy between male and female, they also prove that these ideas are not foreign, but instead rooted in traditional local belief systems.

3.2.3 Race and Class

In *Rafiki*, the conflict between Ziki's and Kena's fathers is not only happening on a political and ethnic level, but it also represents a class difference in the Kenyan society. John Mwaura is the owner of a small shop and Kena and her mother Mercy live in a low-middle class apartment. Ziki and her family reside in an upper-middle class apartment in the neighbourhood. They own an expensive SUV and while Peter Okemi is always in a suit, John Mwaura is dressed more casually. Kena's mother tells her daughter not to waste her time with people like Blacksta, who as a *bodaboda* driver represents the working class of society: "People like the Okemis will lift you up. Everyone else including that Blacksta will just be a weight that keeps you stuck right here" (Kahiu 2018: 00:21:39). It is quite metaphorical that Kena needs to take a lift to reach the Okemis' apartment (00:26:30). Their socio-economic status is not only visible in the huge apartment they own, but also in terms of language they use. Throughout the film, dialogues are in English, Kiswahili or Sheng, an urban Kenyan vernacular, and the characters code-switch between the different languages. In a multilingual context like in Kenya, the choice of language depends on the conversational context, but also on the educa-

tional and thus socio-economic background of the speaker. Kenya is a multilingual country with English and Kiswahili as its official languages. English spoken in Kenya is sometimes enriched by direct translations of Kiswahili phrases and other distinctive linguistic characteristics, so that Alfred Buregeya describes it as a variety that can be called 'Kenyan English' (Buregeya 2019). Rose Okemi, Ziki's mother, speaks English with a British accent. This proves her belonging to the well-off in society who predominantly attend private high schools where they acquire the British accent. Unlike the Okemis, the other characters in *Rafiki* use more Kiswahili in their conversations or speak Sheng. Sheng is an "urban form of communication evolved in Nairobi that manifests the morpho-syntax of Kiswahili and borrows heavily from English and other languages spoken in Kenya, but with an unstable yet innovative lexicon" (Kaviti 2015: 228). It originated as a language of the youth, but is now spoken even by older generations (Kaviti 2015: 231). Sheng is a connotation of lower socio-economic status, in *Rafiki* it is mainly used by Blacksta and his friends cementing their lower status in class. While Ziki mainly speaks English, Kena uses English, Kiswahili and Sheng to navigate her different social circles. When Kena takes Ziki out for a drink at Mama Atim's restaurant, Ziki orders in English and Kena translates her words to the waitress into Sheng and vice versa (Kahiu 2018: 00:16:36). She translates between languages, but at the same time she bridges the class division, because Ziki is not accustomed to eating at roadside restaurants. With Ziki's parents, Kena speaks English, and with Blacksta she uses Sheng. In conversations with her parents, she uses both English and Kiswahili. In my opinion Kena's use of English shows the emotional distance between her and her parents. In rather intimate conversations, her father switches to Kiswahili. Kena's mother's use of English can be interpreted as a reflection of her desire for social advancement. As the language is connected to a higher socio-economic status, she tries to adapt the language in order to achieve or at least to pretend to have this higher status herself.

In *Stories of Our Lives*, most of the dialogue is either in Kiswahili or Sheng. Sheng is used among young people ("Ask Me Nicely"), in urban low-income settings ("Run") and urban middle-class settings ("Each Night I Dream") as well as in rural settings ("Athman"). Two episodes are exceptional in terms of language. The teachers in boarding school in the episode "Ask Me Nicely" speak English as it is a requirement in Kenyan secondary schools. And the episode "Duet" is set in London and the conversa-

tion between the black Kenyan main character and the white British escort is in English. It is an example of upper-middle class lifestyle of a cosmopolitan queer Kenyan. At the same time English is a remnant of Kenya's past under British colonial rule and cannot be separated from its history. This episode therefore sheds light on present day global power asymmetries in connection to race and origin.

"Duet" tells the story of Jeff, a researcher on sexuality and human rights, who attends a conference on gender diversity in London (Chuchu 2014: 00:40:14). In his hotel room he wants to fulfil his sexual fantasy of sleeping with a white man by hiring an escort, Roman. The episode starts with a close-up shot of the two men kissing, a flash-forward of what is going to happen later. The camera is tilted, the Dutch angle creates a dreamy atmosphere out of time and space. Their two faces are framed in profile and back-lighting creates high contrast. Yet their encounter is limited in time – we are reminded of its ephemerality by a constantly ticking clock which we hear on the sound level. After the title insert, the story unfolds chronologically from the beginning as Jeff sits alone on the bed in his hotel room nervously waiting for his visitor (00:40:53). The ticking sound is still very present on the audio level and the following close-up shot shows the source of it, a small bedside table clock. The clock reappears throughout the episode and visualizes the temporality of their meeting.

Figure 9: Researcher Jeff hires escort Roman to his hotel room in London (Chuchu 2014: 00:42:54)

When Roman arrives, Jeff admits that he has no previous experience with paid sex and asks whether they could first talk. This conversation is framed as a centred static medium shot with the characters sitting next to each other on the bed. After an awkward silence in the beginning, they verbalize the category race and its impact on their encounter by labelling it a 'first time': "I have never been with a white guy before. – I have never been with a black guy either. Not many black guys around here who would hire me" (00:42:57). Roman reproduces racist stereotypes about black men (00:44:29) and asks Jeff where he comes from, which is followed by an interesting dialogue that unfolds between the two: "I am from Kenya. – Wow, from Africa. – Kenya. Africa is the continent. We don't like it very much when people group us together like that. […] Africa is huge" (00:43:16). Jeff echoes the critical discourse about the homogenization of the African continent and opposes prevalent stereotypes in the West connected to it. In this scene racialized power structures seem to be subverted, because Jeff teaches Roman and not the other way around. He is also in a more privileged position as he pays for Roman's sex work. Jeff tells Roman that "white people smell different, it's like a white people's smell" (00:45:54). By this, he constitutes black people as the norm and white people as divergent from this standard. He makes visible the often unmarked whiteness and homogenizes white people in the same way black African people have been homogenized: "White people smell the same, no matter what they eat" (00:46:14).

Roman offers Jeff a massage on his bed (00:45:34). The static camera is positioned at Jeff's eye level and in a medium shot it shows his naked upper body. Roman is out of the frame and only his hands are visible, while he massages Jeff's back. Their encounter resembles fragments from Binyavanga Wainaina's coming-out essay "I am a homosexual, mum", in which he remembers his first time being intimate with another man: "It will take me five years after my mother's death to find a man who will give me a massage and some brief, paid-for love. In Earl's Court, London. […] I cannot say the word gay until I am thirty nine, for years after that brief massage encounter" (Wainaina 2014). In the beginning of the episode, the Kenyan researcher Jeff wears a *dashiki*, mostly worn in West Africa, which could be a reference to pan-Africanism, a concept endorsed by Binyavanga Wainaina. In his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*, Adriaan van Klinken dedicates a whole chapter to Binyavanga Wainaina and reads him as a queer prophet, "in the sense of him presenting a radical social, political and religious critique of certain norms and power structures in society, as well as opening up an alternative,

transgressive space of socio-political imagination" (Van Klinken 2019: 35). Reflecting on his research process for the book, Van Klinken reveals intimate sexual encounters between himself and people he met during his research (Van Klinken 2019: 93ff.). In this auto-ethnographic account he questions his role as a white researcher in Kenya and racist power structures connected to it. The situation narrated in "Duet" is quite similar, with reversed roles. Jeff also introduces himself to Roman as a researcher and Roman asks him jokingly, whether their meeting is part of his research (Chuchu 2014: 00:44:43). In this case, a black researcher from Kenya is the subject and not the object of studies, and albeit the remark was meant as a joke, it is an interesting change of perspective. After the massage, Roman asks Jeff whether he can kiss him and from the moment their lips touch, image and audio get out of sync (00:46:46). While they kiss, we hear the clock ticking and listen to a conversation in the off, in which they comment on the kisses and discuss whether Roman kisses all of his clients. This part of the episode seems to be loosely based on an interview in the book *Stories of Our Lives*. The interviewee narrates how he went for a conference in Vancouver and invited an expensive escort called Mathieu to his hotel room, who then kissed him for several hours (The NEST 2015: 283). "Duet" ends with close-up shots in slow-motion of Jeff and Roman being intimate, without explicit images (Chuchu 2014: 00:47:25). A non-diegetic atmospheric soundscape replaces the ticking clock, this in conjunction with the slow-motion effect on the visual layer generates a timeless, dream-like experience.

In *Rafiki*, race as a category does not play a huge role in the story. On the side, they touch on the topic of global mobility when Ziki tells Kena about her travel plans: "I want to see the world. I want to go to all those places where they've probably never seen an African and just show up there and be like: 'Yo, I'm here and I'm a Kenyan. From Africa.'" (Kahiu 2018: 00:19:36). Just like Jeff in "Duet", she is keen to differentiate between the country and the continent, and like him her socio-economic background would allow her to travel to other countries. Yet towards the end of the film, she does not travel voluntarily to London, but is sent there by her parents after they found out about her relationship with Kena. Unlike other stories about migration, in this case Europe is not depicted as a desired place to live, but a place to be banished to. Ziki does not want to travel to London and is in tears while she begs her mother to let her stay (01:09:39). In the short story "Jambula Tree", Sanyu is also sent to London by her parents as a punishment. The city is described as a bad place to live in: "London is cold.

London is a monster which gives no jobs. London is no cosy exile for the banished. London is no refuge for the immoral" (Arac de Nyeko 2006: 168). Thus both short story and film tell a counter-narrative about migration to London and portray it as a place different and less liveable in comparison to Nairobi. This shifts the discourse on migration and constitutes Kenya as the centre and the UK as the periphery.

3.3 Spaces

> Nairobi queer spaces offer a counter-narrative to the dominant discourses on queer expressions that usually equate it with sexual immorality, social degeneration and aberration. These spaces recuperate such negative assumptions of queer lives and practices to more positive and affirmative tones of community, friendship and celebrations of love. (Ombagi 2018: 108)

The two films *Stories of Our Lives* and *Rafiki* show various spaces where queer love is expressed and lived; some of these places are visible and some are hidden, some are created by the community and some are appropriated. Taiwo A. Osinubi states that "queer individuals […] function within various liminal spaces, create functioning physical arenas and subvert hostile spaces" (Osinubi 2019: 74). These spaces are rarely stable, they are rather unsteady and therefore time is an important factor when describing them. In their analysis of queer world cinema, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt argue that "queer texts are often marked by a troubled temporality in which non-synchronous narrativity throws a wrench in the gears of heterosynchronics" (Schoonover/Galt 2016: 272). In the two films, I will explore how this non-synchronous narrativity is used to depict queer spaces in contrast to non-queer spaces. Similarly, Henriette Gunkel describes 'queer temporalities' as disruptions and disordering of linear time conceptions. Queering time in cinema thus means for her "the conscious deployment of time manipulation as a form of unlearning normative regimes of gender and sexuality and in order to enact other, queerer ways of being in the world" (Gunkel 2019: 389f.). I will analyse some queer spaces as they are portrayed in the two films with a special focus on how these spaces are situated within the temporal narrations of the films. Thereby, I will combine the cinematic narratives with literary accounts and empirical research on queer spaces in Nairobi.

3.3.1 Boarding school

The first episode of *Stories of Our Lives* titled "Ask me nicely" (Chuchu 2014: 00:00:23) takes place in a boarding school for girls. In the beginning the two schoolmates Faith and Kate meet in the hallway of their school. Kate plays with a basketball, Faith catches it and starts joking that she will only return the ball if Kate 'asks her nicely'. After secretly exchanging notes in the classroom, the two girls meet again in the

staircase and begin to make out. This intimate encounter on the staircase is already anticipated by their kisses we can hear in the sequence before, while Faith still sits in the classroom. She smiles as she dreams of the meeting with Kate which is audible on the sound level. After the static and centred tripod shots we have seen until now, there is a change in visual language. The camera captures the two girls from slightly above and is tilted. The use of the Dutch angle underlines the interruption of the heteronormative rules of society which are being taught in school. The two girls do not follow the straight norm but subvert it and appropriate the boarding school as a place for queer intimacy, although still secretly and hidden from the view of the other students and teachers. One shot from inside the staircase towards the outside compound emphasizes their hiding. We see some students passing in broad daylight and it is clear that the two girls cannot simply step outside and continue their romance. The next shot shows them again at another place inside the school building where they flirt with each other while leaning against the wall. Kate is dressed differently which implies that the sequence does not show a single event but rather recurrent encounters of the two girls on various days. The feeling of a timeless queer experience is intensified through the use of overlapping sound bits of their kisses and chats, which are out of sync to some of the images.

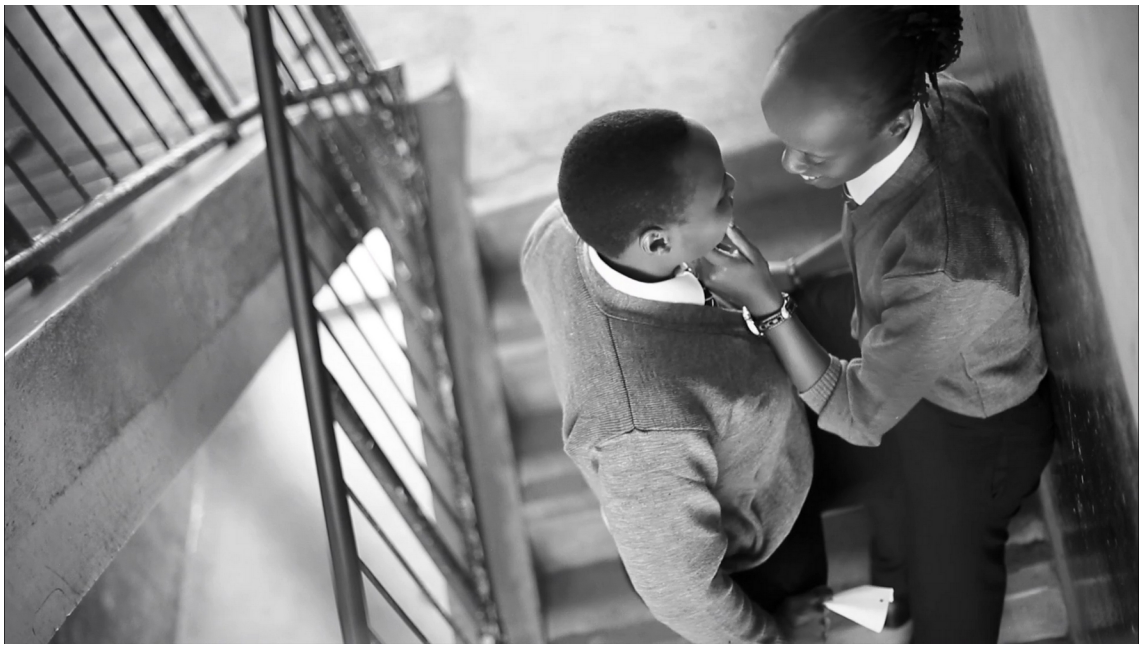

Figure 10: Faith and Kate secretly meet in their boarding school (Chuchu 2014: 00:02:37)

The mosaic of their love story is abruptly interrupted by the school bell that forces them back to reality and in the next scene the two stand in front of the headmistress, who suspends Kate from school. The last sequence of the episode shows static shots of the places where they used to meet secretly and exchange hidden kisses. But this time the places are empty, only full of their memories. An atmospheric background sound gives the scene a dreamy touch. We can hear Kate in a voice-over as she narrates the ending of their relationship. The episode ends with a single ring of a bell and a hard cut to black. The omnipresent symbolism of passing time, both by showing a close-up of a ticking clock (00:01:40) and by the recurrent ring of a bell throughout the episode, is a reference to the temporality of their relationship. It is also a constant reminder of the heteronormative linear time according to which the society functions and which is a threat to the queer, non-linear time they experience together.

Snippets of the story that might be the basis for this episode can be traced in the book with the same title as the film (The NEST 2015). One woman tells her story of being expelled three times from high school: “These expulsions were really annoying, because they always caught me after I’d done it for years. I was like, ‘Come on! You could have caught me last year!’” (The NEST 2015: 14f.). For her the boarding school was a place to not only first experience same-sex intimacy but also to live it for a longer period of time. At another point in the book a woman also admits that she was sent home from high school because they thought that she was a lesbian (The NEST 2015: 109). Elsewhere an interviewee narrates how she met the love of her life when she was seventeen years old: “She played basketball and she was just cool and had swag and I was just really attracted to her” (The NEST 2015: 23). This description seems to have inspired the filmmakers for the character of Kate. And the scene in the episode where she sleeps with the boy from the neighbourhood could be based on the following account: “When I was younger, I tried to break my attraction to girls by getting into a relationship with a boy. There was a boy in my neighbourhood who was attractive, so I called him over and things just progressed to us having sex. He was my first sexual experience. I remember feeling nothing” (The NEST 2015: 287).

In Kevin Mwachiro’s book *Invisible* (2014) there are also many stories of people who have encountered their first same-sex sexual experiences in high school (Mwachiro 2014: 46ff., 60ff., 84ff.). A woman tells the story of how she experienced her time in a secondary boarding school:

> It was an all-girls school, and I thought three-quarters of the girls there were lesbians! They were doing each other left, right and centre. I was perplexed; I had never experienced anything like this. According to me, almost everyone had what was called a 'darling'. These 'darlings' would, over the weekend, spend time in their respective cubicles together, sprucing it up and then having sex. Whether they were lesbian or they were experimenting, I don't know, but I thought being at this school was really cool. In no time, I got myself a 'darling' too. She was the cutest thing. She was with someone already and this put me in trouble while I was there. Some of the girls got caught because of exchanging letters or for being caught in the act. I remember seeing parents being brought into this school because their daughters had been caught having sex. I was never caught having sex with another girl, so being a lesbian in school for me was never really an issue. (Mwachiro 2014: 74f.)

The portrayal of boarding high schools as spaces of queer intimacy in both the film *Stories of Our Lives* and the autobiographical self-writing is supported by empirical research which has been conducted in Kenyan high schools (Mucherah/Owino/McCoy 2016)[4]. This shows that *Stories of Our Lives* puts on screen how students' themselves perceive their boarding schools as places for homosexual encounters among students. Taking the film and the personal accounts into consideration, could a Kenyan single-sex high school be considered a space in which queer love and desire can be expressed? In my opinion this episode of *Stories of Our Lives* shows the ambiguity of boarding high schools as places where young people can get aware of their (same-sex) sexuality and live it to a certain extent, but at the same time homosexuality is restricted and punished by teachers – like elsewhere in society. The film shows both aspects: within the heteronormative school space the two girls find their hideout to get intimate. But eventually they get caught and one of them is suspended from school. Therefore, the queer space is fluid and temporary, safe and unsafe at the same time. It is depicted as different to other places in the school through cinematic means like sound design and camera framing. The elliptical editing interrupts the story's chronology and shows the queer spaces as temporally indeterminable. They exist as long as they are appropriated and enlivened.

4 A number of 1,250 high school students filled a questionnaire on perceptions of homosexuality and the results showed that "41% claimed homosexuality is practiced in schools and 61% believed homosexuality is practiced mostly in single-sex boarding schools. […] The consequences for homosexuality included punishment (66%), suspension from school (61%), and expulsion from school (49%)" (Mucherah/Owino/McCoy 2016: 253).

3.3.2 Night club

Figure 11: Point-of-view shot from Pato at the queer night club (Chuchu 2014: 00:18:46)

The second episode of *Stories of Our Lives* is titled “Run” (Chuchu 2014: 01:13:04) and tells the story of Pato who learns about a queer club in Nairobi’s party district Westlands. After visiting the club himself at night, his homophobic ‘friend’ Kama observes him and later on beats him heavily before Pato can escape and run away. The queer club is introduced with cinematic means as a different space compared to other places in Nairobi. As Pato walks down the street on his own for the first time and passes the club, the film changes its tempo and sound. The sequence is edited in slow-motion and a non-diegetic electronic background soundscape conveys constant tension, but also creates a dreamy and unreal feeling of the place. Pato exchanges intense looks with a man standing outside the club smoking a cigarette. After this short encounter he rushes home, changes his casual dress with a nice shirt and returns to the club. The next shot is a close-up of his face in high contrast and hard low-key lighting against a dark background. He then slowly starts moving through the dark towards the club and the handheld camera follows him, again in slow-motion. A shallow depth-of-field underlines the focus on Pato, small lights in the background turn into bokeh. He seems to be in a timeless space, where past and future is not important, only the present counts. With the next shot we jump inside the building, the camera follows him walking down a white cor-

ridor and the lighting changes from low-key to high-key. He discovers a new space and we get the feeling that the camera experiences it with him. The sound of the scene is an atmospheric layer of snippets of speech and music, fused into an incomprehensible melange. Inside the club people dance with each other and smoke and light immerses the whole scenery into an almost unreal space. Henriette Gunkel describes the queer club in the scene as following:

> The space here then refers to the internal experience of the character, an alternative space that is confusing and exciting at the same time, to which Patrick [Pato] opens up. It is a queer space that functions differently than the assumed real space – here he doesn't need to constantly prove that he is not a fag. (Gunkel 2019: 391f.)

Pato recognizes the cigarette-man he saw before and they start dancing and joking together. When the other man tries to kiss him, Pato excuses himself and leaves the club to get fresh air. As he steps outside, the audio changes into realistic atmospheric sound and the video tempo switches back to normal. While inside the club time and space seem to be irrelevant and indeterminable, outside the harsh reality is back. Pato seems to battle with himself about what he is doing, but eventually decides to return into the club only to find the cigarette-man dancing with another man. He leaves the club disappointedly and in a wide shot he disappears into the dark night of Nairobi city.

In *Rafiki* the main characters Kena and Ziki go on their first date to Uhuru Park. It is a place in Nairobi where many couples go on dates and it is a frequently visited public space close to the Central Business District. The two girls ride on a flamingo carousel and on a pedal boat on the small lake but afterwards Ziki tells Kena: "I want us to go on a real date" (Kahiu 2018: 00:28:05). Their date cannot be real during the day at Uhuru Park because as a homosexual couple they cannot freely express their affection in public. In the following scene the two go on a 'real date' at one of Nairobi's night clubs (00:28:43). As they enter the club the hand-held camera follows the two in a medium shot, visually similar to the scene in "Run" from *Stories of Our Lives*. Non-diegetic background music in slow-tempo, a song titled "Ignited" by Mumbi Kasumba, starts playing. Although the song would not be played in a night club and the two presumably dance to other music, the slow-motion adjusts the visual layer to the audio and creates yet another dreamy atmosphere, where time and space fuse and a queer space emerges. This space is dominated by fluorescent black light and the two girls paint each

other's faces with neon coloured body paint. The other guests in the club have equally painted their bodies in bright colours which makes the whole setting look even more unreal. The girls try out fluorescent heart-shaped glasses and Ziki tries to convince Kena to put on a pink dress. In a quiet moment the two sit somewhere outside the club and dream of a shared future, the music's volume is reduced and we can listen to their intimate conversation. Kena and Ziki are facing each other and sit closely together, a close-up framing of the camera underlines the intimacy of the moment and of their relationship. The club night ends with them standing in front of *kitenge* fabric and gently kissing each other, the soft music is still in the background, but also the diegetic sound of their lips kissing is audible. The backdrop of the *kitenge* could be seen as a statement by the filmmaker that lesbian love is indeed Kenyan, responding to the various conversations on the denial of this fact. *Vitenge* (plural form of *kitenge*) are actually fabrics that are commonly associated with traditions[5] but they are also an integral part of contemporary urban style in Nairobi and in the diaspora, because many designers include the characteristic patterns in modern fashion creating a new hybrid style.

When Eddie Ombagi writes about his experiences in queer spaces in Nairobi, his description of a night club reads like the script for the party scenes in both *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives*:

> The blaring music hits you right up. Bodies huddled together dancing. Other bodies lined up against the wall watching. […] See queers kissing at the corner. See one seated on top of the other. See everyone drinking beer while watching others. See the constant furtive glances. […] Feel the collapse of intimacy. See the hand gestures, the head nods, the smiles. (Ombagi 2018: 106)

In his article, Ombagi continues that "queer spaces of leisure and pleasure, like the nightclub, […] are imagined, read and decoded as invisible: as being outside the public imaginary" (Ombagi 2018: 108f.). In the films, this invisibility is depicted through the night club's separation and its visual otherness compared to the outside world. Ombagi meets queer people in the night club who describe the space as a sanctuary or as a home of sorts (Ombagi 2018: 110). They can be themselves in this safe space and do not have to hide, just like Pato or Kena and Ziki in the two films. The night club might be considered a more stable queer space compared to a boarding school, but its existence is

5 The history of wax prints in Africa is actually more complex, its origins trace back to European traders who brought the fabrics from Indonesia to East Africa. For a historical outline see for instance Akinwumi 2008.

still constantly threatened by homophobic legislation. Furthermore, the space of a night club is not only connected to a specific place, but also a specific time, as its name already states. Ombagi writes:

> For a brief moment, just one-night of every week, every Friday, this space at The Club, becomes a community of persons. It collects disparate identities collapsing them into an entity of friendship; it houses multiple selves reducing the different selves into a range of possibilities that are as genuine as they are temporary. They all know that the night at some point will wear off. However, for the moment, [they] redirect queer love, longing, and desire into this space and make it visible and real. (Ombagi 2018: 110)

In the two films, the ephemerality of the night club as a queer space is expressed through non-diegetic music and sound design as well as slow-motion. While Pato is safe inside the club, as soon as he steps outside he is spotted by Kama who later exerts brutal violence on the former. So while what happens inside the club is mostly invisible to the public, being associated with queer spaces can be highly dangerous. The safe space literally ends at the doorstep. Still Ombagi emphasizes the importance of its existence for the queer community in Nairobi: “In inhabiting these queer spaces, queer bodies in Nairobi ultimately long for community and friendship and connection – even if only momentary and ephemeral. With the search of and for connection, queerness, therefore, disrupts the teleological and temporal usage of the spaces in fleeting and temporary ways” (Ombagi 2018: 114). Keguro Macharia also stresses the importance of the night club for his personal life: “Those hours I spent there dancing made many other hostile hours in other places possible” (Macharia as cited in Ombagi 2018: 115). Thus a queer night club not only has value for the community as a meeting place but also provides strength to empower people individually. In the two films, this significance is represented through the clubs’ distinct differences in sound and look compared to other places.

3.3.3 Matatu

Kenya is known for its *matatus*, privately owned minibuses which are used as means of public transport. These minibuses usually operated by men are quite heteronormative and misogynistic spaces. For instance, sexual harassment of women by both the crew and fellow male passengers happens repeatedly and the *matatu* men use sexist terms referring to a woman’s physique to describe vehicle parts (Mũngai 2013: 236).

Figure 12: Ziki enters the abandoned matatu (Kahiu 2018: 00:23:44)

In *Rafiki*, the minibus is not depicted as a threatening space, but instead, an abandoned *matatu* serves as a hideout for Ziki and Kena. After they get rained on during a soccer match, Ziki runs after Kena to the minibus to protect herself from rain (Kahiu 2018: 00:23:33). The white *matatu* is covered by bushes with purple blossoms. The vehicle is hidden from the public, in the same way queer people have to constantly hide their sexual orientation or gender identity from society. Ziki follows Kena into the *matatu* and discovers a new space, which is exciting and enjoyable for her. Kena literally opens the door to a new world for her. The two women sit on the bed and look each other in the eyes without saying anything and this silence creates an intimacy between them. If the *matatu* is seen as a queer space created by Kena, then this is the first time in the film that Ziki enters a queer space and thus learns about an alternative reality contrasting to the heteronormative society she lives in. Kena on the other hand seems uncertain in the scene and decides to leave before any romance between the two could possibly happen, although Ziki begs her to stay. The rain in this scene is not the only reason (or excuse) the two women end up together in the *matatu* in the first place, it also emphasizes the fact that they literally have to hide in their space from the outside world.

A few days after Kena and Ziki went on their date in a night club and kissed for the first time, the two spend a night together in the abandoned *matatu* (00:37:24). At first Ziki is reluctant and slightly angry, because Kena went to the hideout without

telling her and has left her alone at the table with Kena's friends Blacksta and Waireri. Then she notices how Kena has romantically decorated the inside of the *matatu* with pink rose blossoms and many candles. She also placed a cupcake for Ziki on the table beside the bed. The moment Ziki reaches for the cupcake, a parallel montage sequence starts. Images of the two women sitting next to each other alternate with close-up shots of the two kissing and making out on the bed. Kena tells Ziki: "Just try it out" (00:38:36), before Ziki bites into the cupcake. This can be also understood as Kena encouraging Ziki to get intimate with a woman for the first time. The following sex scene is very implicitly filmed and mainly consists of close-ups of their hands touching and caressing each other. The burning candles illuminate the whole scene into a warm, orange light, which reflects on their skin. Throughout the scene we can hear soft moaning on the audio layer while sound and image are out of sync. The jump cuts as well as the asynchronous editing immerses the viewer into their world, where in this moment of romantic intimacy, time and space is of no importance any more. Through the means of editing, the filmmakers present the abandoned *matatu* as a queer space.

After spending the night together in the *matatu*, Ziki and Kena are woken up by the sun and twittering birds (Kahiu 2018: 00:40:44). Ziki whispers: "I wish this was real", and when Kena replies: "It is", Ziki replies: "When we go out there..." (00:41:18). She does not need to finish the sentence, because they both know: when they leave their safe queer space, they cannot be intimate any more in the streets of Nairobi but have to pretend to be heterosexual.

Later in the film, Ziki's mother catches her daughter and Kena kissing each other in Ziki's room. After a brief and intense argument, Ziki and Kena run away from home and get to their hideout, the abandoned *matatu* (00:53:22). It is night again, but this time the *matatu* is not lit by the warm orange glow of candles. Instead a cold white back light shines through the rear window of the vehicle and leaves part of their faces in shadow, which gives the scene a tense atmosphere. The night is a time of hiding, but it is not to their favour, because this time it is also connoted with danger. Ziki and Kena discuss their future together. Ziki proposes: "We could have our own place just me and you" (00:53:50). The *matatu* is a queer space, where their dreams are valid. But this space is threatened. The same moment Kena agrees to the plan and kisses Ziki, Mama Atim and her daughter Nduta open the door of the *matatu* and start insulting them. A mob of

angry people then violently pulls Ziki and Kena out of their safe space and back to harsh reality.

Taiwo A. Osinubi (2019a: 74) highlights the symbolic meaning of a car as a signifier of freedom and liberation. As described in the beginning, this only applies to some extent to a *matatu*. Furthermore, I would argue that an abandoned minibus has lost its core function to move and thus to take Ziki and Kena to their desired place of freedom and liberation. The scene at the *matatu* therefore stands as a prevision of their love and relationship, with no future and stuck in the moment.

In a short scene towards the end of the film, the *matatu* appears again (01:10:59). In a frontal medium shot we see Kena sitting in front of the abandoned minibus. She has just ended her relationship with Ziki and seems to be all churned up inside, while trying to remain calm on the outside. Tom, the alleged homosexual guy, who has been insulted multiple times before by Kena's 'friend' Waireri, enters the frame and sits down next to Kena. The two do not look at each other, they do not talk, but they both share the pain of being rejected by society. They cannot hide any more in a queer space like the *matatu* because they have been outed unwillingly and are now literally 'out there'. Tom does not talk throughout the film: as a queer person in Kenya, he is silenced by society and does not have a voice to speak for himself.

3.3.4 Utopia

Often times, queer life in Kenya is associated with larger, more renowned cities like the capital Nairobi and the coastal city Mombasa. In the book *Stories of Our Lives*, many interviewees from rural areas associate small towns with "conservatism, narrow-mindedness, gossip, and a lack of anonymity. [They] express the desire to relocate, typically to Nairobi, where queer life is believed to be safer and more open and free" (Van Klinken 2019: 119). Most of the stories from this book, but also from Kevin Mwachiro's *Invisible* (2014) are set in urban environments. In *Rafiki*, Kena and Ziki's love story also unfolds in Nairobi against the backdrop of the fictitious middle-class estate Slopes, and in the film *Stories of Our Lives*, only the episode "Athman" deals with rural life on a tea farm. Unfortunately, Nairobi is not necessarily a safe place to live as a queer person. In "Run" and "Each Night I Dream", the characters escape from the city due to anti-queer violence or they dream of queer safe places. Interestingly, these safe

places are connoted with nature, and are not situated in an urban environment. In “Run”, Pato runs out of the city and finds himself spending the night outside in the countryside. The following day, he wakes up to twittering birds and to the sun gleaming through tree leaves (Chuchu 2014: 00:22:18). In “Each Night I Dream”, Liz visualizes an escape with her girlfriend Achieng to a lonely island, which is presented as a queer utopia in the middle of nature (00:51:32). The dream sequence is edited in slow-motion to the soft non-diegetic song “Ixana Yaadu” by Jim Chuchu. The two women are playful, they hold sparklers in their hands, and the smiles on their faces express their happiness. They walk arm in arm through hovering soap bubbles and hold each other tight, which they could not do in the streets of Nairobi.

In *Rafiki*, Kena dreams of a safe place for Ziki and herself: “I wish we could go somewhere, where we could be real” (Kahiu 2018: 00:48:51). In their present life, they have to hide and constantly live in fear of being caught together. This instability of their private space is visualized by many curtains throughout the film. These separate Kena’s and Ziki’s rooms from the rest of their parent’s apartments and give them the feeling of privacy, yet the curtains are transparent and permeable. They divide their dreams from the reality. When the two women meet for the first time alone on the top of a high building, they pass through blankets and cloth on the washing lines reminiscent of curtains (00:18:50). There, they dream of a shared future. They are above everything and look down onto other people, yet they cannot be seen. They are like strangers above the city and feel like they do not really belong to society. Kena and Ziki agree that they do not want to live a life like their parents: “Just staying at home and doing typical Kenyan stuff: doing the laundry, having babies, making chapo [chapati]” (00:20:02). By giving these examples, it becomes obvious that they disagree with the division of care work in heterosexual relationships, because the tasks they mention are traditionally considered feminine activities. Jokingly and seriously at the same time, the two make a pact, and promise each other that they will “never be like any of them down there” (00:20:24). The space they have created for themselves is temporal, but their time together seems endless to them. This feeling is conveyed though asynchronous editing: we see their lips moving, but the words we hear are out of sync. The editing technique to detach the audio from the image is used two more times in the film: firstly, in the scene of intimacy in the abandoned *matatu*, which I described above, and secondly, when Kena and Ziki end their relationship before the latter is sent to London (01:07:02). All these three

scenes depict crucial moments in their relationship. The break-up scene refers to their first meeting on top of the high building, both in content and form. In the beginning of their romance, Kena attests to Ziki that she is not "the typical Kenyan girl" (00:19:51), but in the end, when Ziki admits, that she does not believe in a shared future for them, Kena bitterly tells her: "You're just a typical Kenyan girl" (01:09:09). The asynchronicity highlights the importance of these special moments, in which they have to decide whether their love is stronger than societal pressure.

The Kenya Film Classification Board argues in a press statement on the ban of the film, that the ending differs from the submitted original script which has been licensed for production:

> In the script, a paper jet made from their political movement campaign lands on one of the main character's shoulder which reminds her of her relationship with her lesbian partner, but leaves the fate of their relationship to the viewer's imagination. However in the film it is her lesbian lover that places her hand on her shoulder, creating the impression of a happy ending to a troubled relationship. (KFCB 2018)

I disagree with this simple interpretation by the KFCB, because to me the ending is ambiguous, as it could also be a visualization of Kena's desire to meet Ziki again, and not a reality. We only hear Ziki's voice who calls Kena's name and see a female hand on Kena's shoulder (Kahiu 2018: 01:15:28). We assume it belongs to Ziki, yet we do not see Ziki's face and instead only a close-up reaction shot of Kena who turns around and starts smiling. The close framing of this sequence is visually similar to a scene with Kena and Blacksta, in which Kena imagines Ziki instead of Blacksta sitting next to her (00:48:16). This could be a hint, that the reunion with Ziki in the last scene of the film only happens in Kena's imagination. The future of their relationship remains unclear.

Stories of Our Lives ends with the reflection about a safe space for queer people. In the end of the last episode "Each Night I Dream", Liz echoes the rejection and alienation of queer people by society and asks in a voice-over:

> Maybe si ni aliens? Maybe tulitoka mahali vitu ka gender, sexuality ni vitu za ujinga. Vitu primitive. Maybe tulicome hapa kufind out kuwa human ni aje. Na maybe time imefika si kwenda home?
> (Maybe we're aliens? Maybe we come from a place where gender and sexuality are silly ideas. Primitive ideas. Maybe we came here to find out what it's like to be human. And maybe it is time for us to go back home?) (Chuchu 2014: 00:56:35)

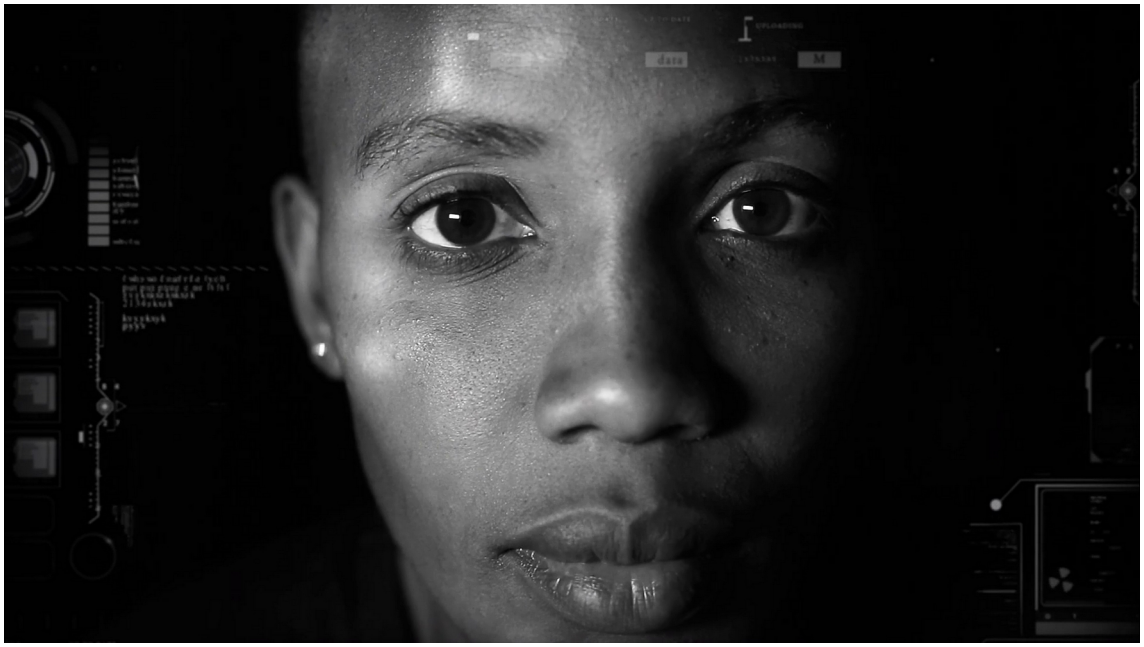

Figure 13: Liz' face with transparent overlays referencing Afrofuturism (Chuchu 2012: 00:57:08)

While we hear her voice, we see dark silhouettes of four people in front of a bright backlight. The medium shot is out of focus, which distorts their limbs and makes them look like aliens. The medium shot is followed by a close-up shot of Liz' face with transparent overlays of digital displays. The image resembles an inner view of an astronaut's helmet. Henriette Gunkel notes that "this moment of alienation refers to other worlds, and hence to other spaces of possibilities to think about desire and freedom, to new dimensions of dreaming" (Gunkel 2019: 399). By placing this episode at the end of the film, The NEST Collective concludes *Stories of Our Lives* with a twofold message: fragments of a queer utopian space can be found both in the past, where 'we come from', and in an imagined future symbolized by Afrofuturism[6], where constructs of gender and sexuality are going to be considered 'primitive ideas'.

6 The directors of the two films deal with the topic of Afrofuturism in other works. In Jim Chuchu's mini-series *We Need Prayers* (2018), the fifth episode titled "This One Went to Market" satirically discusses the West's obsession with Afrofuturism. And in Wanuri Kahiu's critically acclaimed short film *Pumzi* (2009), she imagines a post-war Afrofuturistic dystopian world.

4. Conclusion

In my analysis, I have shown how the two films *Rafiki* and *Stories of Our Lives* subvert assumptions about queer people in Kenya by representing multifaceted and diverse narratives of queer lives. This happens both through the story-line and in more subtle ways through cinematic means. The films do not omit or embellish hostile and violent realities, yet they enrich and complicate this one-sided story with depictions of queer love and happiness. The two films show a variety of queer identities, challenging the homogenizing discourse in Kenyan society around queerness. The queer protagonists and their romantic relationships are not represented as different but rather as similar to heterosexual characters and their relationships. This might contribute to acceptance and to normalisation of same-sex sexualities by a heteronormative society.

As the queer characters are at the centre of the stories, the audience experiences their challenges and empathizes with them. In both films, this emotional connection to the viewers is achieved by breaking the fourth wall through a protagonist's direct look into the camera. Additionally, in scenes of violence and pleasure alike, the camera is positioned on their eye-level and/or shows their point-of-view immersing the viewers into the story. In *Stories of Our Lives*, voice-overs are used to verbalize the protagonists' inner thoughts and reflections, which equally creates a stronger bond with the audience. Tilted images – Dutch angles – visualize and intensify the experience of queer spaces but elsewhere, they have the opposite effect pointing to disorder and danger in moments of anti-queer violence. At one point, the violation of the 180-degree-rule, which defines that the camera needs to be placed in a room on a certain axis, emphasizes the character's inner emotions and creates a feeling of disorientation. In both films, scenes of sexual encounters are implicitly framed in close-up shots creating sexual tension and intimacy. Frontal tracking shots are deployed to visualize queer self-acceptance and crucial points of identity development.

Especially in *Rafiki*, costumes and set-designs are encoded with symbols referring to interpersonal relations. Different characters are associated with certain colours, for instance Ziki with pink and Kena's father with green. The more Kena falls for Ziki, the more pink her clothing becomes. And Kena's mother's feelings for her former husband are reflected in her apartment's walls painted green. Mama Atim, the main antagonist, is coded with the colour red foreshadowing her crucial role in unveiling Kena's

and Ziki's romantic relationship, which leads to brutal mob violence. *Vitenge* fabrics reference traditional heritage and constitute queerness not as foreign but instead as rooted in Kenya's cultural contexts. In *Stories Of Our Lives*, Kate's trousers symbolize her homosexual orientation which she tries to change, represented by exchanging her trousers for a skirt. Pato wears one shirt to enjoy a party at a queer night club, and a different one for everyday life representing his hetero-passing self. In another episode, Liz changes her sex through a traditional ritual to conform her lesbian relationship to heterosexual norms. In this instance, her change of sex is symbolized by a different hair style.

In the two films, varying languages are used to reference the characters' different socio-economic backgrounds and their personal connections. Most dialogues in *Stories of Our Lives* are in Kiswahili and Sheng, but one episode set in London is solely in English representing a Kenyan upper-middle class lifestyle and touching on the topic of racialization. In *Rafiki*, Ziki and her family only speak English which shows her upper-middle class upbringing. Depending on the setting of communication, multilingual speakers like Kena code-switch between English, Kiswahili and Sheng. With her working-class friends she speaks Sheng and with Ziki she uses English. Her parents talk to Kena in English, which shows both their distant relation and their aspiration for upward social mobility. In tense moments of controversy, they switch to Kiswahili to better express their emotions. In both films, there are heterosexual characters like Kate's mother, Kena's mother and Athman who paraphrase the homosexual orientation of their daughters or friend. This inability to call homosexuality by its name reflects its ongoing denial by society and shameful connotation attached to it. By avoiding to speak about it, the heterosexual characters try to deny its existence. In *Rafiki*, a contrary form of silence is represented through the queer character Tom who gets insulted and physically abused several times. He endures the treatment and does not speak a single word throughout the film, which seems to symbolize the silencing of homosexual life by society.

The constant threatening and monitoring of queer lives by state and society is depicted in various ways. In *Rafiki*, a recurrent shot of a helicopter symbolizes the authority of the state and police officers take Ziki and Kena to the police station instead of the mob who has beaten them up. Anti-queer violence and hate speech is also part of *Stories of Our Lives*, where documental footage of riots and a television interview of a

homophobic politician is inter-cut with fictional footage, blurring the line between pre-filmic and filmic reality.

On the sound level, the two films work with non-diegetic music scores consisting of both cheerful and mellow songs which are used to echo the protagonists' feelings and to intensify the moods of the respective scenes. Some of the editing sequences resemble music videos in pacing and look. In *Stories of Our Lives*, atmospheric soundscapes create tension or immerse the listener into dream-like cinematic worlds. The diegetic original sound including dialogues is sometimes out of sync evoking a different sense of time which could be referred to as a 'queering of time'. The asynchronicity creates a non-linear experience of time contrasting the heteronormative concept of linear temporality. Slow-motion editing intensifies moments of happiness and constitutes locations like a night club and a boarding school as queer spaces. These spaces are temporary and exist as long as they are enlivened. This ephemerality is depicted through elliptic editing. The spaces are more or less hidden from the public and being associated with them can be dangerous. They are clearly distinguishable by a different sound and look compared to other spaces in the films. In both films, the protagonists dream of a queer utopia where they do not have to hide their sexual orientation and can live safely.

Both films contain intermedial references to the literary works they are based on or connected to: the anthology *Stories of Our Lives* (2015) and the short story "Jambula Tree" (2006). The source of some film scenes can be traced in the original texts, which have been newly combined and condensed. Additionally, the film *Stories of Our Lives* refers to a traditional myth from the Gĩkũyũ community and both films include references to Christianity and quotations from the bible. In *Rafiki*, Pentecostalism and its exorcism rituals are depicted as a threat to queer lives, yet other literary accounts offer a more nuanced portrayal of Christianity in Kenya, also highlighting its possibilities to empower queer individuals. When Ziki and Kena go on a first date, their female *tuktuk* driver wears a headscarf possibly referencing Islam.

In the process of adapting the Ugandan short story "Jambula Tree" into a feature film script, the script writers kept the original conflict line but fleshed out the story and adjusted names and places to suit it to the local Kenyan context. For instance, the eponymous jambula tree was changed into a *matatu*. Usually in Kenya, such a minibus is a male-dominated space and connoted with hetero-sexism, yet in the film an aban-

doned *matatu* serves as a hideout for Kena and Ziki. This appropriation constitutes the *matatu* as a queer space, yet its inability to move is a prevision that their love has no future and is stuck in the moment. The cinematic depiction of Kena's and Ziki's parents resembles the short story, except that Sanyu's father is sexually abusive and the corresponding character, Ziki's father, is physically abusive. This alteration prevents reproducing the stereotype of homosexuality resulting from sexual abuse during childhood.

Both films contain various supporting characters like friends and family who are supportive or hostile towards the main protagonists, or somewhere in between these two opposing poles. By showing a variety of reactions to queerness, the single narrative of homophobia is challenged and complicated. In *Rafiki*, the filmmakers' feminist approach results in the existence of strong female characters who do not fit into stereotypical categories. Existing patriarchal structures are exposed, but also glimpses of subverted and alternative gender roles are established. These reversed gender roles exist without explanation, in order to change the narrative of gender conforming behaviour.

Apart from creating a counter-narrative around queerness in Kenya, the films also tackle homogenizing stereotypes about the African continent and contest global power relations. In *Rafiki* for instance, London is not portrayed as a desired place to live but as a place to be banned to. In *Stories of Our Lives*, an episode set in London around the Kenyan researcher Jeff and his white escort raises the issues of race and class and reverses racial power structures. Consequently, the two films offer alternative stories on migration and relations between the Africa and Europe.

By analysing the two films against the backdrop of Kenya's legal, political, historical and cultural setting, I have shown that the artistic works complement queer academic research and literary accounts. Therefore, by telling diverse and alternative stories, the films contribute to shaping the discourse around queerness in Kenya. *Rafiki* tells the story of its lesbian lead characters, while also touching on the topics of gender expression and gender roles. *Stories of Our Lives* deals with homosexuality, with both lesbian and gay characters, but also discusses bisexuality and questions the construction of the biological sex. Yet 'queer' can describe many more sexual orientations and gender identities. Further research is needed to investigate the portrayal of, for instance, transsexual, intersexual, and non-binary identities in Kenyan literary and cultural production. For this, the artistic and academic works of gender non-conforming performance activist and feminist scholar Neo S. Musangi (2014, 2018) could be a point of departure.

The film *Stories of Our Lives* ends with a zoom into dark, endless outer space with sparkling stars, and in a voice-over we hear Binyavanga Wainaina dreaming of a queer future for Kenya:

> There is a law in this country that says that a man and another man are not allowed to express love. This law justifies violence, evictions, being excluded by your families, being black-mailed, being harassed by the police, losing your job and many other things. I'd want to live in a place where I am allowed to love who I want to love, I'd want to live in a place where my life is not constantly monitored and I have to justify how I live it. This is my country. And as a Kenyan, I'd want to live here, I would not want to run away. I am a homosexual and I am a proud homosexual. I have never felt ashamed of who I love, I have been told that I should be ashamed of who I love, but I never felt shame in love. And I don't believe that anyone should feel shame. All of us are different, all seven billion of us on this planet are different. But all of us need love. (Chuchu 2014: 00:57:36)

On May 21st, 2019, Binyavanga Wainaina died of a stroke. The world lost a great writer and an outspoken queer activist. Three days after his death, Kenya's High Court dismissed the case of other queer activists to abolish sections 162 and 165 of the Kenyan Penal Code in order to decriminalize same-sex sexual activities (NGLHRC 2019). The queer activists are appealing the judgment. The struggle continues.

5. Filmography

Camara, Mohamed 1997: *Dakan*. Guinea/France, 87 min.

Chuchu, Jim 2014: *Stories of Our Lives*. Kenya/South Africa, 62 min.

Chuchu, Jim 2018: *We Need Prayers. A Mini-Series.* Kenya, 73 min.

Gitonga, David Tosh 2012: *Nairobi Half Life*. Kenya/Germany, 96 min.

Kahiu, Wanuri 2009: *Pumzi*. Kenya/South Africa, 22 min.

Kahiu, Wanuri 2018: *Rafiki*. Kenya/RSA/France/Lebanon/Norway/Netherlands, 82 min.

Murimi, Peter 2020: *I Am Samuel*. Kenya/Canada/UK/USA, 69 min.

Ramaka, Joseph Gaï 2001: *Karmen Geï*. Senegal/France/Canada, 86 min.

Trengove, John 2017: *Inxeba*. South Africa/France/Germany, 88 min.

Von Wallström, Jonny 2016: *The Pearl of Africa*. Sweden, 74 min.

Williams, Roger Ross 2013: *God Loves Uganda*. USA, 83 min.

Zouhali-Worrall, Malika; Wright, Katherine F. 2012: *Call Me Kuchu*. USA, 87 min.

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